



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau

Child and Family Services Review Summary of Findings

ALABAMA

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**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ALABAMA

The Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) assesses State performance during a specified time period with respect to seven child welfare outcomes in the areas of safety, permanency, and well-being and with respect to seven systemic factors. The assessment is based on information from the following sources:

- The Statewide Assessment prepared by the State child welfare agency – the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR);
- The State Data Profile prepared by the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services;
- Reviews of 50 case records from three counties in the State; and
- Interviews or focus groups (conducted at all three counties and the State capital) with a wide range of stakeholders including children, parents, foster parents, various levels of State and local DHR personnel, collaborating agency personnel, school personnel, mental health providers, court personnel, legislators, and attorneys.

The review of Alabama’s child welfare programs showed that the State met the national standards for measures pertaining to the recurrence of maltreatment, maltreatment of children in foster care, re-entries into foster care, and stability of foster care placements. In addition, the State was in substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 1, *Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect*, and there were a number of individual items related to the seven outcomes that were found to be a Strength for the State. In particular, the State was noted to be effective with respect to the following:

- Preventing repeat maltreatment (item 2) and foster care re-entry (item 5).
- Providing stable foster care placements for children (item 6).
- Placing children in close proximity to their biological families (item 11) and with their siblings (item 12) when possible and in the children's best interest.
- Meeting children's physical health (item 22) service needs.

The State also was found to be in substantial conformity with six of the seven systemic factors. The State was in conformity with the factors pertaining to the Statewide information system; training; service array; responsiveness to the community; quality assurance system; and foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment, and retention.

A specific finding of the CFSR process was that Alabama's DHR is particularly strong with respect to its willingness, and the capacity it has developed, to provide a wide array of services to families not only to prevent an initial removal from home, but also to ensure that families that have been reunified receive the services and supports that they need for as long as they need them.

While Alabama was successful in the above areas of the review, a key finding of the review is that the State did not achieve substantial conformity with six of the seven safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes. The State also did not meet national standards for measures relating to the length of time to achieve reunification or the length of time to achieve adoption. The most significant concern with regard to outcomes is the timely achievement of permanency for children in foster care, as measured by items pertaining to the permanency goal for children (item 7), attainment of permanency through reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relative (item 8), or attainment of permanency through adoption (item 9). These items are assessed under Permanency Outcome 1, *Children have permanency and stability in their living situations*.

Another area of concern is related to Child and Family Well-Being Outcome 1, *Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs*. All of the four items assessed as part of this outcome were rated as an Area Needing Improvement. These items pertain to meeting the service needs of children and families, involving families in the case planning process, and the frequency of worker visits with children and parents.

The State also was not in substantial conformity with the systemic factor pertaining to the Case Review System. Assessment of this factor resulted in the finding that DHR practice is inconsistent with respect to involving parents in the development of case plans, holding permanency hearings for children in foster care, and providing a process for termination of parental rights (TPR) proceedings in accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act.

The following is a summary of the CFSR findings with respect to outcomes and systemic factors.

KEY FINDINGS RELATED TO OUTCOMES

I. SAFETY

Outcome S1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.

Status of Safety Outcome S1

The Alabama DHR achieved substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 1. This determination was based on the following findings:

- 95 percent of the cases were rated as having substantially achieved this outcome, which is more than the 90 percent required for substantial conformity.

- The State met the national standard for the percentage of children experiencing more than one substantiated or indicated child maltreatment report within a 6-month period.
- The State met the national standard for the percentage of children experiencing maltreatment from caretakers while in foster care.

A summary of the findings for specific items assessed under this outcome is presented below.

Item 1. Timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment

Item 1 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because reviewers determined that in only 80 percent of the applicable cases, the response to maltreatment reports was within DHR policy timelines.

Item 2. Repeat maltreatment

Item 2 was assigned an overall rating of Strength because (1) children experienced two maltreatment incidents within 6 months of one another in only 5 percent of the cases reviewed, and (2) as reported in the State Data Profile, the incidence of repeat maltreatment within 6-months for Alabama in 2000 was 5.2 percent which meets the national standard of 6.1 percent.

Outcome S2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.

Status of Safety Outcome S2

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 2. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was substantially achieved in only 69 percent of the case records reviewed, which is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of substantial conformity. A summary of the findings for specific items assessed under this outcome is presented below.

Item 3. Services to family to protect child(ren) in home and prevent removal

Item 3 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in only 72 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the agency's efforts to maintain children safely in their homes were either sufficient or appropriate based on the risk to the child. Despite this rating, the availability and quality of preventive services and the emphasis of the agency on using preventive services whenever possible is a clear strength for DHR.

Item 4. Risk of harm to child

Item 4 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because reviewers determined that in only 76 percent of the cases, DHR had made sufficient efforts to reduce risk of harm to children. The problem identified was one of inconsistency among workers in addressing risk issues for children being served in their own homes. In many cases, however, workers were found to be involved with families and to be managing risk in appropriate and effective ways.

II. PERMANENCY

Outcome P1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.

Status of Permanency Outcome P1 – Not in Substantial Conformity

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 1. This determination was based on the following:

- Although the State met the national standards for foster care re-entries and stability of foster care placements, the State did not meet the national standards for reunifications within 12 months of entry into foster care and adoptions within 24 months of entry into foster care.
- 50 percent of the cases reviewed were rated as having substantially achieved Permanency Outcome 1, which is less than the 90 percent required for substantial conformity.

A summary of the findings for specific items assessed under this outcome is presented below.

Item 5. Foster care re-entries

Item 5 was assigned an overall rating of Strength because: (1) the State's incidence of foster care re-entry within 12 months of discharge from a prior episode is 7.9 percent, which meets the national standard of 8.6 percent, and (2) there were no cases in which foster care re-entry occurred.

Item 6. Stability of foster care placement

Item 6 was assigned an overall rating of Strength because: (1) in 87 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that children had placement stability or that placement changes were in the best interest of the child, and (2) data from the State Data Profile indicate that 96.4 percent of children in foster care for 12 months or less during FY 2000 had no more than two placement settings, which meets the national standard of 86.7 percent.

Item 7. Permanency goal for child

Item 7 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in only 73 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that DHR had established appropriate permanency goals for children or had established goals in a timely manner. The key concerns identified pertained to the timely filing of TPR petitions, the appropriateness of the use of the goal of long-term foster care, and the inconsistent use of concurrent planning in working toward permanency for children.

Item 8. Reunification, Guardianship or Permanent Placement with Relatives

Item 8 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because: (1) data from the State Data Profile indicate that the State's percentage for reunifications occurring within 12 months of entry into care is 63.0, which does not meet the national standard of 76.2 percent, and (2) in only 62 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to attain permanency for children with a goal of reunification, permanent placement with relatives, or guardianship. A key concern identified was that in some cases the goal of reunification is being maintained even when parents are uncooperative and there is no evidence that parents are working toward their treatment goals.

Item 9. Adoption

Item 9 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because: (1) in only 22 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency was engaging in sufficient efforts to achieve finalized adoptions for children in foster care, and (2) data from the State Data Profile indicate that the State's percentage of finalized adoptions in FY 2000 that occurred within 24 months of removal from home is 13.1, which does not meet the national standard of 32.0. A key finding of the case record review process and stakeholder interviews was that DHR workers were either not completing the necessary paperwork to move children toward adoption, or that they were uninformed about the adoption process and about available adoption subsidies and were misinforming foster parents interested in adopting their foster children.

Item 10. Permanency goal of other planned permanent living arrangement

Item 10 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the finding that in only 62.5 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the goal of long term foster care was appropriate, and the agency was adequately preparing the child for self-sufficient independent living at the time of emancipation.

Outcome P2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.

Status of Permanency Outcome P2

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 2. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was rated as substantially achieved in 70 percent of the cases, which is less than the 90 percent required for substantial conformity. A summary of findings for specific items assessed relevant to this outcome is presented below.

Item 11. Proximity of foster care placement

Item 11 was assigned an overall rating of Strength because in 93 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that children were placed in foster care homes that were in close proximity to their parents or, when children were not placed in close proximity, the placement was made to meet the special needs of the child.

Item 12. Placement with siblings

Item 12 was assigned an overall rating of Strength based on the finding that in 89 percent of the cases, siblings were either placed together or there was an appropriate reason for their separation. According to the Statewide Assessment, this finding is consistent with the results of internal quality assurance reviews indicating that siblings are placed together unless there is a need to address behavioral or emotional issues for one or more of the siblings.

Item 13. Visiting with parents and siblings in foster care

Item 13 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in only 78 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DHR had made adequate efforts to facilitate visitation and was providing or ensuring adequate supervision during

visits. Despite this rating, there were many instances in which visitation was of sufficient frequency because DHR workers and foster parents made diligent efforts to encourage and support visitation.

Item 14. Preserving connections

Item 14 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in only 83 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that children's connections to family, community culture, faith, and friends had been adequately preserved while the children were in foster care. The primary finding was that DHR was inconsistent in its efforts to maintain children's connections to their biological families.

Item 15. Relative placement

Item 15 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because reviewers determined that in only 66 percent of the cases, the agency had made diligent efforts to locate and assess relatives as potential placement resources. A common finding for this item was that while DHR was effective in reaching out to maternal relatives, it was not as consistent in seeking and evaluating paternal relatives.

Item 16. Relationship of child in care with parents

Item 16 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in only 74 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the agency had made sufficient efforts to support or maintain the bond between parents and their children while the children were in foster care. The key concern identified with respect to this item was that DHR did not consistently attempt to work with fathers and involve them in visiting their children or in developing their children's case plans.

III. WELL-BEING

Outcome WB1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.

Status of Well-Being Outcome 1

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 1. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was rated as substantially achieved in only 54 percent of the case records reviewed, which is less than the 90 percent required

for a determination of substantial conformity. A summary of findings for specific items assessed as relevant to this outcome is presented below.

Item 17. Needs and services of child, parents, foster parents

Item 17 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in only 66 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the needs and services of children, parents, and/or foster parents had been, or were being, adequately addressed by DHR. Although this finding reflects inconsistencies in practice rather than typifying case practice, reviewers observed several cases in which needs were not assessed; services were not offered; or services were offered, but the agency did not follow up to determine whether parents were accessing the services for themselves or their children.

Item 18. Child and family involvement in case planning

Item 18 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in only 64 percent of the applicable case records, reviewers determined that DHR had appropriately involved parents or children in the process of developing the case plan. This rating reflects inconsistencies in practice, particularly with regard to efforts to involve fathers in the case planning process. However, there were many cases in which workers made concerted efforts to involve parents and children in case plan development on an ongoing basis.

Item 19. Worker visits with child

Item 19 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in only 62 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the frequency of caseworker visits with children was sufficient to ensure adequate monitoring of the child's safety and well-being. Case record reviewers determined that for most of the other cases, workers typically visited the children less than once a month.

Item 20. Worker visits with parents

Item 20 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in only 53 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that workers' visits with parents were sufficiently frequent or of sufficient quality to promote the safety and well-being of the child or increase movement toward permanency for the child. The general finding was that for many of the cases, workers typically visited parents less than once a month.

Outcome WB2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.

Status of Well-Being Outcome WB2

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 2. This determination is based on the finding that 71.4 percent of the case records reviewed were found to have substantially achieved this outcome, which is less than the 90 percent required for substantial conformity. A summary of findings for specific items assessed as relevant to this outcome is presented below.

Item 21. Educational needs of the child.

Item 21 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in only 71 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DHR was effectively addressing children's educational needs, either because they did not assess needs or did not provide the services necessary to meet identified needs in the remaining cases.

Outcome WB3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

Status Of Well-Being Outcome 3

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 3. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was rated as substantially achieved in 75 percent of the applicable cases, which is less than the 90 percent required for a determination of substantial conformity. A summary of findings for specific items assessed as relevant to this outcome is presented below.

Item 22. Physical health of the child

Item 22 was assigned an overall rating of Strength based on the finding that in 85 percent of the applicable case records, reviewers determined that DHR's efforts to address the physical health needs of children were adequate.

Item 23. Mental health of the child

Item 23 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in only 74 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DHR was adequately addressing children's mental health assessment and service needs.

KEY FINDINGS RELATING TO SYSTEMIC FACTORS

IV. STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Status of Statewide Information System

Alabama is in substantial conformity with this factor.

Item 24. The State is operating a Statewide information system that, at a minimum, can readily identify the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child who is (or within the immediately preceding 12 months, has been) in foster care.

This item is rated as a Strength because the State's information system can provide all of the demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child in foster care.

V. CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Status of Case Review System

Alabama is not in substantial conformity with this systemic factor.

Item 25. Provides a process that ensures that each child has a written case plan to be developed jointly with the child's parent(s) that includes the required provisions.

Item 25 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement because although DHR has a process in place to meet this systemic factor, it is not consistent in the implementation of this process with respect to the involvement of parents in the case plan development.

Item 26. Provides a process for the periodic review of the status of each child, no less frequently than once every 6 months, either by a court or by administrative review.

Item 26 is rated as a Strength because information gathered during the onsite review and the Statewide Assessment indicates that the State has a process in place for periodic reviews and that generally these reviews are conducted in a timely manner for all children.

Item 27. Provides a process that ensures that each child in foster care under the supervision of the State has a permanency hearing in a qualified court or administrative body no later than 12 months from the date the child entered foster care and no less frequently than every 12 months thereafter.

Item 27 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement because the Statewide Assessment and information gathered during the onsite review indicate that even though the State has a process in place for permanency hearings, a significant number are not conducted in a timely manner.

Item 28. Provides a process for termination of parental rights proceedings in accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act.

Item 28 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement because although DHR does provide a process for termination of parental rights in accordance with ASFA, adherence to the ASFA timelines varies among the counties and among the court systems.

Item 29. Provides a process for foster parents, preadoptive parents, and relative caregivers of children in foster care to be notified of, and have an opportunity to be heard in, any review or hearing held with respect to the child.

Item 29 is rated as a Strength because State law and agency policy require workers to give written notification to foster and adoptive parents and related caregivers of scheduled hearings and their right to attend, and training has been provided to foster parents to support their participation.

VI. QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Status of Quality Assurance System

Alabama is in substantial conformity with this systemic factor.

Item 30. The State has developed and implemented standards to ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services that protect the safety and health of the children.

Item 30 is rated as a Strength because the Statewide Assessment and information gathered during the onsite review indicate that the State has implemented standards and has a process in place to monitor compliance with the standards.

Item 31. The State is operating an identifiable quality assurance system that is in place in the jurisdictions where the services included in the CFSP are provided, evaluates the quality of services, identifies strengths and needs of the service delivery system, provides relevant reports, and evaluates program improvement measures implemented.

Item 31 is rated as a Strength because the State is operating a comprehensive quality assurance system in collaboration with community stakeholders that identifies practice and policy issues, provides reports to relevant stakeholders, evaluates the quality of the services provided, identifies gaps in services, and provides for collaboration with communities to meet service gaps.

VII. TRAINING

Status of Training

Alabama is in substantial conformity with this systemic factor.

Item 32. The State is operating a staff development and training program that supports the goals and objectives in the CFSP, addresses services provided under titles IV-B and IV-E, and provides initial training for all staff who deliver these services.

Item 32 is rated as a Strength because the State provides a comprehensive training program for all staff that supports the system of care and has successfully evolved as the system has improved and is based on staff needs.

Item 33. The State provides for ongoing training for staff that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to the services included in the CFSP.

Item 33 is rated as a Strength because the State provides ongoing training through multiple State and local opportunities that address staff skill needs.

Item 34. The State provides training for current or prospective foster parents, adoptive parents, and staff of State licensed or approved facilities that care for children receiving foster care or adoption assistance under title IV-E that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to foster and adopted children.

Item 34 was assigned a rating of Strength because the State provides current and prospective foster and adoptive parents quality training that prepares them to effectively parent children in their care.

VIII. SERVICE ARRAY

Status of Service Array

Alabama is in substantial conformity with this systemic factor.

Item 35. The State has in place an array of services that assess the strengths and needs of children and families and determine other service needs, address the needs of families in addition to individual children in order to create a safe home environment, enable children to remain safely with their parents when reasonable, and help children in foster and adoptive placements achieve permanency.

Item 35 is rated as a Strength because there is an array of services available to address the needs of children and families.

Item 36. The services in item 35 are accessible to families and children in all political jurisdictions covered in the State's CFSP.

This item is rated as a Strength because the State has effectively developed resources across the State, and counties are providing a variety of services Statewide.

Item 37. The services in item 35 can be individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families served by the agency.

Item 37 is rated as a Strength because, according to the Statewide Assessment, the focus of DHR is on individualized assessment and service delivery.

IX. AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

Status of Agency Responsiveness to the Community

Alabama is in substantial conformity with this systemic factor.

Item 38. In implementing the provisions of the CFSP, the State engages in ongoing consultation with tribal representatives, consumers, service providers, foster care providers, the juvenile court, and other public and private child- and family-serving agencies and includes the major concerns of these representatives in the goals and objectives of the CFSP.

Item 38 is rated as a Strength because DHR's inclusiveness and collaboration in setting goals and objectives and evaluating the child welfare system supports positive relationships with the community.

Item 39. The agency develops, in consultation with these representatives, annual reports of progress and services delivered pursuant to the CFSP.

Item 39 is rated as a Strength because DHR involves a wide array of stakeholders in development of the CFSP and annual progress reports.

Item 40. The State's services under the CFSP are coordinated with services or benefits of other Federal or federally assisted programs serving the same population.

This item is rated as a Strength because DHR engages in substantial and effective coordination of services and benefits with other programs.

X. FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION

Status of Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention

Alabama is in substantial conformity with this systemic factor.

Item 41. The State has implemented standards for foster family homes and child care institutions, which are reasonably in accord with recommended national standards.

This item is rated as a Strength because appropriate standards are in place. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, DHR licenses child placing agencies and residential facilities according to State standards on a biannual basis.

Item 42. The standards are applied to all licensed or approved foster family homes or childcare institutions receiving title IV-E or IV-B funds.

This item has been rated as a Strength because the State applies its standards to all licensed or approved foster family homes and childcare institutions receiving title IV-E or IV-B funds.

Item 43. The State complies with Federal requirements for criminal background clearances as related to licensing or approving foster care and adoptive placements and has in place a case planning process that includes provisions for addressing the safety of foster care and adoptive placements for children.

Item 43 is rated as a Strength because the State complies with the requirement for criminal background clearance and has multiple processes for addressing safety in foster care and adoptive placements.

Item 44. The State has in place a process for ensuring the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed.

Item 44 is rated as a Strength because the State has a process for ensuring the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed.

Item 45. The State has in place a process for the effective use of cross-jurisdictional resources to facilitate timely adoptive or permanent placements for waiting children.

This item is rated as a Strength because the State has a process in place to address barriers to cross-jurisdictional placements.

INTRODUCTION

This document presents the findings of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) for the State of Alabama. The findings were derived from the following documents and data collection procedures:

- The Statewide Assessment prepared by the State child welfare agency – the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR);
- The State Data Profile prepared by the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services;
- Reviews of 50 case records from three counties in the State; and
- Interviews or focus groups (conducted at all three counties) with a wide range of stakeholders including children, parents, foster parents, various levels of State and county DHR personnel, collaborating agency personnel, school personnel, mental health providers, court personnel, legislators, and attorneys.

The key characteristics of the 50 case records reviewed are the following:

- 22 cases were reviewed in Jefferson County (Birmingham), 12 in Shelby County, and 16 in Montgomery County.
- All 50 cases were cases that had been open at some time during the period under review.
- 30 cases were “foster care cases” (cases in which the State agency had placement and care responsibility, and the children were in an out-of-home placement at some time during the period under review), and 20 were “in-home services cases” (cases in which families maintained custody of their children and received child welfare agency services while children remained in their homes or in a voluntary placement).
- In 14 (28%) cases, all children in the family were Caucasian; in 34 (68%) cases, all children in the family were African American; and in 2 (4%) cases, all children in the family were of two races.
- The **primary** reasons for the opening of a child welfare agency case were the following:
 - Neglect (not including medical neglect) – 13 cases (26%)
 - Sexual abuse - 7 cases (14%)
 - Physical abuse - 6 cases (12%)
 - Substance abuse by parent – 6 cases (12%)
 - Medical neglect - 3 cases (6%)
 - Child's behavior - 3 cases (6%)
 - Domestic violence in the child's home - 3 cases (6%)
 - Mental/physical health of parent - 2 cases (4%)
 - Reasons other than child maltreatment or child behavior - 7 cases (14%)

- Among **all** reasons identified for children coming to the attention of the child welfare agency, neglect (not including medical neglect) was cited in 27 (54%) cases, substance abuse by parents was cited in 20 (40%) cases, physical abuse was cited in 13 (26%) cases, and sexual abuse was cited in 11 (22%) cases.
- For 25 (83%) of the 30 foster care cases, the children entered foster care prior to the period under review and remained in foster care during the entire period under review. For 13 (65%) of the 20 in-home services cases, the case was opened prior to the period under review and remained open during the entire period under review.

The first section of the report presents the CFSR findings relevant to the State's performance in achieving specific outcomes for children in the areas of safety, permanency, and well-being. For each outcome, there is a table providing the degree of outcome achievement by site, a presentation of the State's status with regard to substantial conformity with the outcome, and a discussion of each item assessed as part of the overall outcome assessment. The second section of the report provides the ratings and a discussion of each of seven systemic factors relevant to the child welfare agency's ability to achieve positive outcomes for children.

SECTION 1: OUTCOMES

I. SAFETY

Safety Outcome 1

Outcome S1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Jefferson	Montgomery	Shelby	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	17	13	10	40	95.2
Partially Achieved:	0	0	0	0	0
Not Achieved or Addressed:	2	0	0	2	4.8
Not Applicable:	3	3	2	8	
Conformity of Statewide data indicators with national standards:					
	National Standard	State's Percentage	Meets Standard	Does Not Meet Standard	
Repeat maltreatment	6.1	5.2	X		
Maltreatment of children in foster care	.57	.15	X		

STATUS OF SAFETY OUTCOME 1

The Alabama DHR achieved substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 1. This determination was based on the following findings:

- 95 percent of the cases were rated as having substantially achieved this outcome, which is more than the 90 percent required for substantial conformity.
- The State met the national standard for the percentage of children experiencing more than one substantiated or indicated child maltreatment report within a 6-month period.
- The State met the national standard for the percentage of children experiencing maltreatment from caretakers while in foster care.

A primary finding of the CFSR process was that DHR is effective in keeping children safe from repeat maltreatment while in their own homes and ensuring the safety of children who are in foster care placements. In addition, DHR responds to reports of child maltreatment in a timely manner in most cases, although data from the case record reviews indicate that there are inconsistencies in

practice in this area. A key concern identified with respect to this outcome was that DHR workers do not always respond in accordance with agency policy to maltreatment reports on open cases.

The findings for the specific items assessed for this outcome are presented below.

Item 1. Timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: The assessment of item 1 was applicable for 10 of the 50 case records. Forty case records were not applicable for assessment because they did not involve reports of child maltreatment during the period under review. In assessing item 1, reviewers were to determine whether the response to a maltreatment report occurring during the period under review had been initiated in accordance with child welfare agency policy. The policy of the Alabama DHR in responding to maltreatment reports is that children determined to be at high risk must be seen immediately. Children who are considered not to be at high risk (e.g., the perpetrator no longer has access to the child), must be seen within 3 working days. All other types of child abuse and neglect reports require that the child be seen within 5 days. The results of the assessment were the following:

- Item 1 was rated as a Strength in 8 (80%) of the 10 applicable cases.
- Item 1 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 2 (20%) of the 10 applicable cases.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength when reviewers determined that workers initiated an investigation of a child maltreatment report in accordance with State policy, including establishing face-to-face contact with the child within required timelines. Cases were rated as Area Needing Improvement when the response to a report was not initiated within the required timelines. The two cases assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement for this item involved reports that were not "high risk."

Although there were few cases involving maltreatment reports during the period under review, in 27 of the 50 cases, there were more than 2 maltreatment reports over the life of the case. In 9 of those cases, there were 5 or more maltreatment reports over the life of the case.

Reviewers also observed that in 5 cases, when contracted service providers reported allegations of child maltreatment in open cases to DHR workers, the reports were not passed on for an investigation despite the seriousness of the allegations.

Many stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that DHR responds to reports of child maltreatment in a timely manner. These stakeholders noted the following: (1) investigations units are staffed with experienced investigators who receive training on an ongoing basis, (2) staff have radio/cell phone contact with police departments to ensure immediate contact if necessary, and (3) response time on most reports is immediate regardless of priority. A few stakeholders, however, indicated that timeliness of response is not consistent throughout the agency and there are frequent complaints from the community about reports that are not responded to in a timely or appropriate manner.

Determination and Discussion: Item 1 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because reviewers determined that in 20 percent of the applicable cases, the response to maltreatment reports was not within DHR policy timelines. In addition, in five cases, a maltreatment report occurred while the case was open for services, but the report was not investigated as a new allegation.

The findings pertaining to item 1 are not consistent with information provided in the Statewide Assessment. According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR has established caseload standards that have enabled social workers to respond to and complete investigations in a timely manner. However, it should be noted that the two cases assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement were in the urban site and involved reports that were not classified as “high risk.”

Item 2. Repeat maltreatment

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of Item 2 was applicable for 43 of the 50 case records. Seven case records were not applicable for assessment because DHR did not come into contact with the case as a result of a child maltreatment report. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether there had been at least one substantiated or indicated maltreatment report during the period under review, and if so, whether another substantiated or indicated report occurred within 6 months of that report. The results of the assessment were the following:

- Item 2 was rated as a Strength in 41 (95%) of the 43 applicable cases.
- Item 2 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 2 (5%) of the 43 applicable cases.

Cases were assigned a rating of strength for this item if (1) there were no substantiated or indicated maltreatment reports during the period under review (35 cases), or (2) there was one substantiated or indicated report (or report assigned to an alternative response) but there was not another one within a 6-month period (8 cases). In 30 of the cases, children were in a foster care placement. Of the 8

cases in which there was at least one substantiated or indicated report (or report assigned to an alternative response) during the period under review, there were 2 cases in which another substantiated or indicated report occurred within a 6-month period.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue voiced mixed opinions regarding the effectiveness of DHR in preventing repeat maltreatment. Some stakeholders observed that the incidence of repeat maltreatment may be higher than the data indicate because when contracted service providers working on open cases make reports of risk of harm incidents to DHR workers, these reports are not always investigated as child maltreatment reports. These stakeholders noted that although State policy is to investigate these reports even if the case is already open, there is inconsistency in the agency regarding the implementation of this policy. As discussed previously, case record reviewers observed this situation in five cases, including four in-home services cases and a foster care case in which the child experienced a risk of harm situation while visiting a parent.

Other stakeholders expressed the opinion that repeat maltreatment is an infrequent occurrence due to the following factors: (1) the rapid development and implementation of safety plans in all cases; (2) the array of services that DHR makes available to families to prevent repeat maltreatment; and/or (3) the DHR policy of requiring that all cases be reviewed by a committee prior to case closure.

Determination and Discussion: Item 2 was assigned an overall rating of Strength based on the following:

- Children experienced 2 maltreatment incidents within 6 months in only 5 percent of the applicable cases reviewed.
- As reported in the State Data Profile, the incidence of repeat maltreatment within 6 months for Alabama in 2000 was 5.2 percent, which meets the national standard of 6.1 percent.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR believes that the low rate of recurrence of maltreatment is due to the agency policy of requiring continued assessments of risk from the first involvement with the case, to case closure. The Statewide Assessment also notes that the availability and emphasis on in-home services enhances DHR's ability to prevent maltreatment recurrence. The implementation of comprehensive assessments to address family functioning as opposed to assessing only the presenting allegations also was described as contributing to the prevention of repeat maltreatment.

Information in the Statewide Assessment confirmed the observations of several stakeholders and case record reviewers regarding the response to child maltreatment reports made on open cases. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, during internal quality assurance reviews, DHR discovered that workers do not always make formal child maltreatment reports when they receive information about abuse or neglect incidents in open cases. This issue is currently being addressed by supervisory and consultant review of incidents. In addition, DHR is emphasizing to all staff the importance of reporting these incidents in accordance with policy requirements.

Safety Outcome 2

Outcome S2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Jefferson	Montgomery	Shelby	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	10	13	11	34	69.4
Partially Achieved:	4	2	0	6	12.2
Not Achieved or Addressed:	8	1	0	9	18.4
Not Applicable:	0	0	1	1	

STATUS OF SAFETY OUTCOME 2

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Safety Outcome 2. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was substantially achieved in only 69.4 percent of the case records reviewed, which is less than the 90 percent required for a rating of substantial conformity.

Although an overall rating of substantial conformity was not achieved, the CFSR process found that DHR has a wide range of services available to maintain children safely in their homes and is committed to implementing a preventive services response to child maltreatment reports whenever possible. However, the CFSR process also determined that the preventive services provided are not always appropriate to reducing risk of harm to children, or that when appropriate services are provided, DHR is not consistent in monitoring families to assess whether services are effective in reducing the risk of harm.

The findings for the specific items assessed are presented below.

Item 3. Services to family to protect child(ren) in home and prevent removal

___ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: There were 25 cases for which an assessment of item 3 was applicable. Twenty-five cases were not applicable for the assessment because there were no substantiated or indicted maltreatment reports or identified risks of harm to children in the home during the period under review. For this item, reviewers were to assess whether, in responding to a substantiated or indicated

maltreatment report or risk of harm, the agency made diligent efforts to provide services to families to prevent removal of children from their homes while at the same time ensuring their safety. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 3 was rated as a Strength in 18 (72%) of the 25 applicable cases.
- Item 3 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 7 (28%) of the 25 applicable cases.

Cases were rated as a Strength when reviewers observed one or more of the following situations:

- Services were provided to the family to prevent removal or support reunification (13 cases).
- The child was removed from home and placed in foster care because the risk of harm was too high to warrant preventive services (4 cases).
- The perpetrator was removed from the home (1 case).

Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that:

- The services provided were not sufficient to ensure children's safety or resolve the problems in the family (3 cases).
- Children were removed unnecessarily without considering the possibility of in-home services (2 cases).
- Children who remained in their homes should have been placed in out-of-home care because of the high level of risk (2 cases).

Stakeholders commenting on this issue were in general agreement that DHR has an impressive array of services to prevent removal of children from their homes. These services were described as creative and individualized. Stakeholders were particularly positive regarding the Family Options program, which is a family preservation program that is accessible 24 hours a day and uses a skills-based behavioral approach to working with families. Stakeholders noted that Family Options staff are highly trained in providing services to keep families together and that the program implements ongoing evaluations to assess effectiveness and tracks children up to 2 years after termination of services. Stakeholders expressed concern about those cases in which law enforcement has the initial contact with the family and removes the children without consulting with DHR regarding the potential for preventive services.

Although many stakeholders suggested that DHR's emphasis on in-home services is positive, and the number of removals is decreasing, other stakeholders expressed concern that in some instances safety plans are developed without an adequate assessment of risk and of underlying issues in the family. A few stakeholders expressed the opinion that there are instances in which appropriate services are put in place, but there is little follow up to determine whether families are accessing services or whether services are engendering changes in the family.

Determination and Discussion: Item 3 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 28 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the agency's efforts to maintain children safely in their homes were either insufficient or

inappropriate. Despite this rating, the availability and quality of preventive services and the emphasis of the agency on using preventive services whenever possible is a clear strength for DHR. According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR requires a comprehensive family assessment for every case, and emphasizes provision of individualized services so that families can provide a safe environment for children in their own homes.

Item 4. Risk of harm to child

☐ Strength ☒ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 4 was applicable for 49 of the 50 case records reviewed. The assessment of item 4 required reviewers to determine whether the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to reduce the risk of harm to the children involved in each case. The assessment resulted in the following findings:

- Item 4 was rated as a Strength in 37 (76%) of the 49 applicable cases.
- Item 4 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 12 (24%) of the 49 applicable cases.

Cases were rated as a Strength for this item when reviewers determined the following:

- The risk of harm to children was appropriately addressed by removing children from their homes and providing services to parents to address risk issues (16 cases).
- The risk of harm to children was appropriately addressed by removing children from their homes and seeking termination of parental rights (TPR) (7 cases).
- The risk of harm to children was effectively managed by providing services to families to address risk concerns while the children remained in their homes or in a voluntary placement with relatives (13 cases).
- The risk of harm to children was addressed by removing the perpetrator (1 case).

Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that children remained at high risk in their homes or were placed in high-risk situations while in foster care. Some examples of the problems identified by reviewers include the following (some cases had more than one problem identified):

- The services provided were not adequate to reduce risk while children remained in the home (2 cases).
- No efforts were made to provide services to the family to address risk concerns (6 cases).
- The services were appropriate for reducing risk, but DHR did not monitor the case to assess service participation or outcomes (1 case).
- There was no evidence in the case file of a risk assessment or a safety plan (3 cases).

- There were serious safety issues in the family that were not being addressed by the agency (3 cases).
- Children were in out-of-home placements that posed safety concerns (3 cases) (Reviewers noted that workers on these cases were unaware of the existing safety concerns.)

Some stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that the DHR policy of having committees review all cases prior to case closure ensures that risk of harm has been sufficiently addressed. Other DHR activities cited by stakeholders as promoting risk reduction were the following: (1) the emphasis on children's safety in foster parent training, (2) reduced caseload sizes that allow workers to see families more often and become more invested with families, and (3) the use of comprehensive safety plans.

Some stakeholders, however, voiced concerns about the consistency of DHR's effectiveness in addressing risk of harm to children. A few noted that safety plans do not always address the needs of all of the children in the home and that in some instances family participation in services is not monitored. Other stakeholders indicated that some workers rely too heavily on information from contracted service providers rather than having face-to-face contacts with the children, parents, and foster parents. Still other stakeholders suggested that DHR is not consistent with respect to the extent of oversight families receive when children are returned home. These stakeholders expressed the opinion that children sometimes are being sent home too soon because there is a "rush to reunify."

Determination and Discussion: Item 4 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because reviewers determined that in 24 percent of the cases, DHR had not made sufficient efforts to reduce risk of harm to children. The general finding was a lack of consistency among workers in addressing risk issues. This finding is not consistent with information reported in the Statewide Assessment indicating that it is agency practice and policy to develop safety plans with all families to address the issues that brought the families to the attention of the department and to ensure that families can manage those issues if they resurface.

II. PERMANENCY

Permanency Outcome 1

Outcome P1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Jefferson	Montgomery	Shelby	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	7	4	4	15	50.0
Partially Achieved:	5	5	3	13	43.3
Not Achieved or Addressed:	1	1	0	2	6.7
Not Applicable:	9	6	5	20	
Conformity of Statewide data indicators with national standards:					
	National Standard (percentage)	State's Data (percentage)	Meets Standard	Does Not Meet Standard	
Foster care re-entries	8.6	7.9	X		
Length of time to achieve reunification	76.2	63.0		X	
Length of time to achieve adoption	32	13.1		X	
Stability of foster care placements	86.7	96.4	X		
Length of stay in foster care*	N/A	22 months			

*Not used to determine substantial conformity.

STATUS OF PERMANENCY OUTCOME 1

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 1. This determination was based on the following:

- Although the State met the national standards for foster care re-entries and stability of foster care placements, the State did not meet the national standards for reunifications within 12 months of entry into foster care or adoptions within 24 months of entry into foster care.
- Only 50 percent of the cases reviewed were rated as having substantially achieved Permanency Outcome 1, which is less than the 90 percent required for substantial conformity.

The CFSR process revealed that the incidence of re-entries into foster care and children's stability while in placement are areas of strength for DHR. Among the foster care cases reviewed, there were no re-entries into foster care during the period under review, and most children experienced stability in their placements both prior to and during the period under review. However, the CFSR process also revealed that DHR is not consistent in its efforts to achieve permanency for children in a timely manner and in some foster care cases, permanency goals were determined to be inappropriate to meet the child's needs.

The findings with respect to specific items assessed for this outcome are presented below.

Item 5. Foster care re-entries

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Seven of the 30 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of foster care re-entries because they involved children who had entered foster care at some time during the period under review. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the entry into foster care during the period under review had occurred within 12 months of discharge from a prior foster care episode. The results of this assessment were that item 5 was rated as a Strength in all 7 of the applicable cases because there were no re-entries into foster care within a 12 month period.

Some stakeholders commenting on this issue pointed to the DHR practice of having a committee review cases prior to case closure as a major contributing factor to the low incidence of foster care re-entries. Other stakeholders suggested that the extensive array of post-reunification services that are made available to families after they are reunified explains the low incidence of foster care re-entry. These stakeholders noted that DHR provides families that have been reunified with ongoing supports and services for as long as they need them.

Determination and Discussion: Item 5 was assigned an overall rating of Strength based on the following:

- The State's incidence of foster care re-entry within 12 months of discharge from a prior episode is 7.9 percent, which meets the national standard of 8.6 percent.
- There were no cases in which foster care re-entry occurred.

According to the Statewide Assessment, re-entries into foster care are comprised primarily of the following types of cases: 1) cases in which the case plan was not completed before a change in custody was made; and 2) cases involving children who were in DHR

custody and then were temporarily committed to the Department of Youth Services or the Department of Mental Health and then returned to DHR custody.

Item 6. Stability of foster care placement

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: All 30 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of Item 6. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the child experienced multiple placement settings during the period under review and if so, whether the changes in placement settings were necessary to achieve the child's permanency goal or meet the child's service needs. The findings of this assessment were the following:

- Item 6 was rated as a Strength in 26 (87%) of the 30 applicable cases.
- Item 6 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 4 (13%) of the 30 applicable cases.

Cases were rated as a Strength for this item when the child had not experienced multiple placement settings during the period under review. The case record review revealed that only 5 of the 30 children in foster care had more than 3 placement changes during the life of the case, and only 2 children had more than 2 placement changes during the period under review. Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement for this item when the children experienced multiple placements during the period under review (2 cases), or when reviewers determined that the child's placement was not appropriate to meet the child's needs and therefore was not stable (2 cases). Only 8 of the children in the 30 foster care cases had ever experienced a placement in a residential treatment facility.

There was general consensus among stakeholders commenting on this issue that placement stability is a strength for DHR. Stakeholders noted that the agency conducts thorough early assessments of placement needs of children coming into care and carefully matches those needs with an available family. In addition, stakeholders in one county reported that DHR will only place one family in each home; i.e., they do not mix children from different families. This allows foster parents to focus on the needs of just one family.

Case record reviewers reported that foster parents were complimentary about DHR staff during interviews and indicated that they usually receive the support they need from their workers. However, stakeholders expressed concern that relative caregivers may not receive the same level of support that non-relative foster parents receive. A few stakeholders suggested that foster parents who provide care for children with behavior problems need specialized services and supports from the agency to sustain the placement. One needed service identified was family therapy.

Determination and Discussion: Item 6 was assigned an overall rating of Strength based on the following:

- In 87 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that children had placement stability or that placement changes were in the best interest of the child.
- The State Data Profile indicated that 96.4 percent of children in foster care for 12 months or less during FY 2000 had no more than two placement settings. This meets the national standard of 86.7 percent.

Information in the Statewide Assessment attributes the State's performance with respect to placement stability to the policy of strongly discouraging the use of temporary placements, particularly shelters. The Statewide Assessment noted that it is rare that there is not a placement resource for a child who does not require specialized care.

Item 7. Permanency goal for child

☐ Strength ☒ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: All 30 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of item 7. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had established an appropriate permanency goal for the child in a timely manner. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 7 was rated as a Strength in 22 of the 30 applicable cases.
- Item 7 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 8 of the 30 applicable cases.

The assessment also identified the following permanency goals for children in foster care.

- 13 children had a goal of reunification or permanent placement with relatives.
- 9 children had a goal of adoption.
- 8 children had a goal of long term foster care leading to emancipation.

All 9 children with a goal of adoption had an initial goal of reunification that was changed to adoption during the course of the case. All 8 children with a goal of long-term foster care/emancipation had an initial goal of reunification. In 20 of the foster care cases, the children had been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months. TPR had been filed for 9 of these children and attained for 8 of them.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength for this item when reviewers determined that the permanency goal was appropriate and the goal was established in a timely manner. Cases were assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement when reviewers observed that:

(1) the agency had not filed for TPR in accordance with ASFA requirements and had not identified exceptions to filing for TPR (4 cases), or (2) the agency did not establish a goal in a timely manner (4 cases). For example, in four cases, reviewers determined that the goal of reunification was maintained for too long a period of time before it was changed to adoption.

Some stakeholders commenting on the issue of TPR filing suggested that DHR caseworkers file for TPR in a timely manner, while other stakeholders expressed the opinion that DHR workers delay filing for TPR and maintain the goal of reunification for too long. A few stakeholders attributed delays in seeking TPR to the high incidence of staff turnover. These stakeholders noted that when a case is transferred from one worker to another, the “new” worker often wants to “start over with the family,” particularly if the goal is reunification. Other stakeholders attributed delays to overcrowded court dockets and the unwillingness of some judges to approve adoption as a goal. In contrast, another group of stakeholders suggested that delays in seeking TPR are due to problems at the agency level and that judges, attorneys and GALs are aware of ASFA time frames regarding filing for TPR and are committed to adhering to them.

Stakeholders also expressed the opinion that biological parents frequently are not informed about ASFA timelines and the potential for TPR early on in their contacts with the agency. These stakeholders suggested that agency workers tend to “tiptoe around the issue of TPR” in dealing with families in the Individualized Service Plan (ISP) meetings instead of telling them up front what the potential consequences might be. It was suggested that if parents were aware of the potential for TPR early on in the case, they might be more focused on meeting the requirements of their treatment plans.

Stakeholders commenting on the appropriateness of the use of long term foster care as a “permanency” goal were in general agreement that there are too many children in DHR custody with that goal and that DHR is not consistent in exploring alternative goals for many of these children. Although some stakeholders suggested that children with this goal are usually older children who do not want to be adopted, the case record reviews indicated that for some older children with the goal of long-term foster care, the goal was established at an early age. For other children, however, a goal of reunification was maintained for many years before it was changed to long term foster care when they reached the age of 15 or 16.

Agency stakeholders noted that many of the children with a goal of long-term foster care are in stable foster homes in which foster parents do not want to adopt but are committed to caring for the children until they reach adulthood. These stakeholders expressed concern about removing children from these homes. However, in these situations it is not clear that DHR fully explores the reasons why foster parents might not want to adopt and ensures that the foster parents are aware of the benefits of adoption and the supports available to them if they do adopt, such as adoption subsidies and continued Medicaid supports.

Several stakeholders indicated that another barrier to permanency is that workers are reluctant to change a child's goal to adoption because they are not trained in how to talk to children about adoption in a meaningful way.

Finally, while some stakeholders said that they are seeing evidence of concurrent planning, others noted that concurrent planning is not happening with most cases. In order to build the agency's capacity to attain permanency, DHR is developing a training curriculum in conjunction with the National Resource Center for Permanency Planning to address concurrent planning. The agency also has established an Office of Foster Care and a position of permanency specialist to focus on permanency and ASFA timeframes. Internal stakeholders also suggested that they need to determine ways to address the court-related barriers to attaining permanency, such as continuances and overloaded dockets.

Determination and Discussion: Item 7 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 27 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that DHR had not established appropriate permanency goals for children or had not established goals in a timely manner. The findings of the case review process are generally consistent with information provided in the Statewide Assessment and perceptions of stakeholders. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, DHR views the timely attainment of permanency as a current challenge and plans are in place to meet this challenge, particularly with respect to providing training on concurrent permanency planning. A particular issue to be addressed concerns the assessment of when "enough is enough" with respect to reunification efforts. Another issue identified in the Statewide Assessment is ensuring that judges adhere to the mandates of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). To meet this challenge, DHR and the Federally-funded State Court Improvement Project have developed sample court orders and plan to place more emphasis on their use. In addition, legislation is being considered to place more stringent timeframes into State law.

Information in the Statewide Assessment also indicates that DHR is concerned about the number of children with a permanency goal of "long-term foster care" (21.6% in FY 2000). It was suggested that many of these children are older children who are not in relative care because relatives were not available or were not appropriate resources for them. However, the Statewide Assessment also noted that there are a number of children in foster care who are younger than age 15 with a permanency goal of long-term foster care.

Item 8. Reunification, Guardianship, or Permanent Placement with Relatives

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 8 was applicable for 13 cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency achieved the goal of reunification or permanent placement with relatives for the children in a timely manner or, if the goal had not been achieved in a timely manner, whether the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to achieve the goal. Legal guardianship is not an option in Alabama unless the child's parents have died, however, relatives can obtain temporary legal custody of children in their care. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 8 was rated as a Strength for 8 (62%) of the 13 applicable cases.
- Item 8 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement for 5 (38%) of the 13 applicable cases.

There were 9 cases in which the children's permanency goal was reunification and 4 cases in which the goal was permanent placement with relatives. In 7 of these cases, the children had been in care for 12 months at the time of the case record review. In 6 cases, reunification had been achieved and in 4 cases children were in permanent placements with relatives. In 3 cases reunification was achieved within 12 months of the time of removal from the home.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength for this item when reviewers determined that the agency had achieved the goal in a timely manner or had taken appropriate measures to achieve the goal. Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that there were unnecessary delays in attaining reunification and/or that DHR efforts to attain reunification were not sufficient.

Stakeholders commenting on the issue of reunification provided mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness of DHR in reunifying families in a timely and appropriate manner. Some stakeholders suggested that DHR reunifies families too quickly and puts children at risk. Other stakeholders voiced support for DHR's focus on expedited reunifications. Many stakeholders praised DHR for its extensive post-reunification services, which are provided to ensure that families have the services and supports for as long as necessary to maintain the reunification.

Determination and Discussion: This item was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the following:

- The State Data Profile indicates that the State's percentage for reunifications occurring within 12 months of entry into care is 63.0, which does not meet the national standard of 76.2 percent.

- In 38 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency had not made diligent efforts to bring about permanency for children with a goal of reunification or permanent placement with relatives.

Despite these findings, case record reviews also revealed that some DHR workers were effective in engaging families in meeting the treatment plan requirements for reunification and supporting biological parents in their efforts to be reunified with their children. Several parents told case record review team members that their DHR workers had been a major support to them in getting their lives together and being able to be with their children again.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR views the time to achieve the permanency goal of reunification as a challenge. However, the Statewide Assessment also notes that more children are coming into care at the request of parents, due to the parents' inability to cope with their children's behavior problems. It may be that the time needed to address these behavior problems often is a barrier to timely reunification. In addition, the Statewide Assessment reported that although permanency hearings and ISP's are designed to expedite children's reunifications with their families, it appears that they are not consistently used for that purpose.

Item 9. Adoption

☐ Strength ☒ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Nine cases were applicable for an assessment of item 9. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether appropriate and timely efforts had been, or were being, undertaken to achieve finalized adoptions. The results were the following:

- Item 9 was rated as a Strength in 2 (22%) of the 9 applicable cases.
- Item 9 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 7 (78%) of the 9 applicable cases.

None of the cases for which adoption was a goal had a finalized adoption. In 3 cases, however, the children were in pre-adoptive placements with foster parents. DHR had filed for TPR in 6 cases and TPR was achieved in 5 cases.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength when reviewers determined that the agency had initiated the necessary steps to move the child toward adoption. Cases were assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that: (1) the agency had not taken appropriate measures to move the child toward adoption, and/or (2) workers were uninformed about the adoption process and adoption subsidies, and were often providing incorrect information to foster parents interested in completing the adoption process.

There was general consensus among stakeholders commenting on this issue that permanency through adoption is problematic for children in DHR custody. Stakeholders noted that although some adoption delays may be attributed to the court process (such as crowded dockets and the extensive time for TPR appeals), delays also may be attributed to the reluctance on the part of some workers to establish a goal of adoption and seek TPR. Stakeholders voiced the general opinion that workers need training on adoption practice, particularly on preparing children for adoption and on understanding the financial subsidies and supports available to adoptive parents. The need for this training was supported by a case record review finding that there were 3 cases in which workers provided foster parents with incorrect information about adoption subsidies and eligibility for medical coverage for adopted children.

There also was consensus among stakeholders that a clear barrier to timely adoptions is the fact that DHR is not consistent in its efforts to conduct intensive searches for biological fathers and other close relatives early on in the case. As a result, when fathers or relatives come forward at later points in the case, permanency oriented activities must be halted until the issues pertaining to fathers or relatives are resolved.

Another barrier to timely adoptions identified by stakeholders is the lack of consistent effort on the part of DHR to find adoptive placements for children when foster parents choose not to adopt. The general belief expressed by stakeholders was that if the foster parent did not want to adopt, it was unlikely that the child would be adopted. Stakeholders noted that when county agencies have children who are not going to be adopted by their foster parents, they can refer them to the State Adoption Unit for adoption searches.

Stakeholders also suggested that DHR is not consistent in its efforts to discuss the benefits of adoption with relatives. Several stakeholders noted that relatives are not being informed about their eligibility for subsidies and other supports if they choose to adopt.

Determination and Discussion: Item 9 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the following:

- In 78 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that the agency was not engaging in sufficient efforts to achieve finalized adoptions for children in foster care.
- Data from the State Data Profile indicate that the percentage of finalized adoptions in FY 2000 occurring within 24 months of removal from home is 13.1, which does not meet the national standard of 32.0 percent.

Information in the Statewide Assessment indicates that DHR is aware of the need to expedite finalized adoptions for children with a goal of adoption. Some of the key factors identified in the Statewide Assessment as barriers to timely adoption were: (1) the amount of paperwork involved; (2) the need for higher subsidy rates; (3) the increase in the number of appeals to TPR decisions and the length of time for a decision on a TPR appeal; (4) the lack of consistency in compliance with ASFA timeframes by some of the

State's 75 juvenile court judges; and (5) the frequency with which continuances of court hearings are granted, further delaying permanency.

The Statewide Assessment also noted that adoptions of children by their foster parents are not being processed in a timely manner and that many of the approximately 350 children awaiting foster parent adoption have had parental rights terminated for more than one year. This problem was attributed to the fact that some counties do not have full-time staff dedicated to facilitating the adoption process. Consequently, as indicated in the Statewide Assessment, there is a need for county child welfare agencies to have accountability for the timeliness of the foster parent adoption process.

According to the Statewide Assessment, children with the plan of non-foster parent adoption are overwhelmingly special needs. Many have already been in care longer than 24 months before they are referred to the Office of Adoption for placement planning. Some have had foster parent adoption as a previous case plan. Although DHR policy directs that workers document efforts toward adoption as soon as this becomes the case plan, only a very small number of children are referred to the Office of Adoption for assistance prior to TPR.

Item 10. Permanency goal of other planned permanent living arrangement

☐ Strength ☒ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: The assessment of item 10 was applicable for 8 cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine if efforts to attain other planned permanent living arrangements were effective. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 10 was rated as a Strength in 5 (62.5%) of the 8 applicable cases.
- Item 10 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 3 (37.5%) of the 8 applicable cases.

Cases were rated as a Strength for this item when reviewers determined that other more permanent goals had been considered and appropriately ruled out and that the agency was assisting the child in working toward self-sufficient independent living at the time of the child's eventual emancipation. Cases were assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that the agency had not adequately explored permanency goals before establishing a goal of long-term foster care or was not providing appropriate services to prepare the child for self-sufficient independent living at the time of emancipation.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed concern that long-term foster care has become a "catch-all" category and DHR often establishes this goal when foster parents indicate that they do not want to adopt the child in their care, but are committed to caring for

the child until adulthood. Stakeholders suggested that in these cases, DHR is not making sufficient efforts to explore with these families the benefits of adoption.

Determination and Discussion: Item 10 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement based on the finding that in 37.5 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that: (1) more permanent goals other than the goal of long term foster care had not been considered and appropriately ruled out, or (2) the goal was appropriate, but the agency was not adequately preparing the child for self-sufficient independent living at the time of emancipation.

Permanency Outcome 2

Outcome P2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Jefferson	Montgomery	Shelby	Total	Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	7	8	6	21	70.0
Partially Achieved:	6	2	1	9	30.0
Not Achieved or Addressed:	0	0	0	0	
Not Applicable:	9	6	5	20	

STATUS OF PERMANENCY OUTCOME P2

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Permanency Outcome 2. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was rated as substantially achieved in only 70 percent of the cases, which is less than the 90 percent required for substantial conformity.

The CFSR process revealed several strengths pertaining to this outcome. For example, DHR was found to be effective in placing children in the same county or community as their families of origin, in keeping siblings together even when sibling groups were extremely large, and in facilitating visitation between children and their siblings in foster care. The CFSR process also revealed, however, that DHR is not consistently effective in its efforts to facilitate visitation between parents and children, support the bond between parents and their children, or seek relatives as potential placement resources. One concern identified was the inconsistency with respect to DHR's efforts to involve non-custodial fathers with their children through visitation or even contact with the fathers.

Specific findings pertaining to the items assessed under Permanency Outcome 2 are presented and discussed below.

Item 11. Proximity of foster care placement

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Twenty-seven of the 30 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of item 11. Cases were considered not applicable when TPR had been attained prior to the period under review and/or when contact with parents was not considered to be in the child's best interest. In assessing item 11, reviewers were to determine whether the child's foster care setting was in close proximity to the child's parents or close relatives. This assessment resulted in the following findings:

- Item 11 was rated as a Strength in 25 (93%) of the 27 applicable cases.
- Item 11 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 2 (7%) of the 27 applicable cases.

Cases were rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that children were placed in the same community or county as their family of origin (21 cases), or children were placed out of county in order to meet their service needs or to be placed with relatives (4 cases). In the two cases assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement, reviewers determined that an out-of-county placement did not meet the best interests of the child.

Stakeholders did not comment on this issue.

Determination and Discussion: Item 11 was assigned an overall rating of Strength because in 93 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that children had been placed in foster care homes that were in close proximity to their parents or, when children were not placed in close proximity, the placement was necessary to meet the child's needs. This finding was consistent with information provided in the Statewide Assessment that DHR's policy is to place children in close proximity to their families of origin.

Item 12. Placement with siblings

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Nineteen of the 30 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of item 12 because the children in the cases had siblings who were also in foster care. In assessing item 12, reviewers were to determine whether sibling were, or

had been, placed together, and, if not, whether separation was necessary to meet the needs of one or more of the children. This assessment resulted in the following findings:

- Item 12 was rated as a Strength in 17 (89%) of the 19 applicable cases.
- Item 12 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 2 (11%) of the 19 applicable cases.

In 12 of the 19 applicable cases, the child was in the same placement setting as at least one other sibling, and in 7 of these cases, the child was in the same placement setting as all of his or her siblings. Reviewers determined that separation from one or more siblings was appropriate in 5 cases. For the most part, an appropriate separation was one in which placement together did not meet the emotional, behavioral, or medical needs of one or more of the siblings.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue were in general agreement that siblings are almost always placed together. There also was agreement among stakeholders that when siblings are separated, the separation is almost always necessary to meet the individual needs of one or more of the children. Stakeholders in all three counties praised DHR for its ability to find homes that are willing to take large sibling groups (six or more children) and for its focus on keeping siblings together. Stakeholders in one county praised the county DHR for its policy of placing children from only one family group in a foster home, allowing the foster parents to focus on only one particular family of children.

Determination and Discussion: Item 12 was assigned an overall rating of Strength based on the finding that in 89 percent of the cases, siblings were either placed together or reviewers determined that separation of siblings was appropriate. According to the Statewide Assessment, this finding is consistent with the results of internal quality assurance reviews indicating that siblings are placed together unless there is a need to address behavioral or emotional issues for one or more of the siblings.

Item 13. Visiting with parents and siblings in foster care

☐ Strength ☒ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 13 was applicable for 27 of the 30 foster care cases. Cases were not applicable if the child had no siblings in foster care, if the parents could not be located despite diligent efforts, and/or if visitation with parents (or siblings) was considered not in the child's best interests. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine (1) whether the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to facilitate visitation between the child and his or her parents and siblings in foster care, and (2) whether the frequency of visits with parents and siblings was sufficient to meet the child's needs. The findings of this assessment were the following:

- Item 13 was rated as a Strength in 21 (78%) of the 27 applicable cases.
- Item 13 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 6 (22%) of the 27 applicable cases.

The analysis of applicable case records revealed that visits between children and their mothers took place on a weekly basis in 5 cases, twice a month in 7 cases, monthly in 2 cases, and less than monthly in 5 cases. There were 6 cases in which there were no visits between mothers and children during the period under review. For the 11 cases in which visits between mother and child took place on a less than monthly basis (or not at all), reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to promote more frequent visitation in 6 cases.

Fathers were more likely than mothers to be identified as not applicable for this assessment because they could not be located or because visits between children and fathers were deemed to be not in the child's best interest. For all applicable cases, visits between children and their fathers took place on a weekly basis in 3 cases, twice a month in 2 cases, monthly in 2 cases, and less than monthly in 6 cases. There were 6 cases in which no visits occurred between fathers and their children. For the 12 cases in which visits between fathers and their children took place on a less than monthly basis (or not at all), reviewers determined that the agency had made diligent efforts to promote more frequent visitation in 7 cases.

Visits between siblings occurred weekly or twice a month in 12 of the 14 cases involving siblings in foster care. There was only one case in which there were no visits between siblings and one case in which visitation occurred less than monthly. In all of the cases involving siblings, reviewers determined that visitation was facilitated primarily by foster parents.

Cases were rated as a Strength for this item when reviewers determined that the frequency of visits between the child in foster care and his mother, father, and siblings was sufficient to meet the child's needs, or, if visits were not of sufficient frequency that DHR has made diligent efforts to promote visitation. Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that DHR had not made sufficient efforts to facilitate visitation or when reviewers had a concern about the level of supervision provided during visits with parents. This concern was raised in two cases in which foster parents were permitting unsupervised visits between children and parents who were identified perpetrators and reviewers determined that children were at risk of harm during the unsupervised visits.

The few stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that foster parents are proactive in their efforts to facilitate visitation among siblings and between children and their parents, and provide transportation or have the visits take place in their homes whenever appropriate.

Determination and Discussion: Item 13 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 22 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DHR had not made adequate efforts to facilitate visitation or was not providing or ensuring adequate supervision during visits. Despite this rating, there were many instances in which visitation between children in foster care and their mothers and siblings took place weekly or at least twice a month, and in which both DHR workers and foster parents made diligent efforts to encourage and support visitation.

Item 14. Preserving connections

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: Item 14 was applicable for assessment in all 30 of the foster care cases. In assessing item 14, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made, or was making, diligent efforts to preserve the child’s connections to family, neighborhood, community, heritage, family, faith, and friends while the child was in foster care. The assessment resulted in the following findings:

- Item 14 was rated as a Strength in 25 (83%) of the 30 applicable cases.
- Item 14 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 5 (17%) of the 30 applicable cases.

In 22 of the 30 applicable cases, reviewers determined that children’s primary connections had been “significantly” preserved while they were in foster care; in 7 cases, reviewers determined that children’s primary connections had been “partially” preserved; and in 1 case, reviewers determined that children’s primary connections had not been preserved at all.

For 22 of the cases rated as a Strength, reviewers determined that connections had been significantly preserved, while for 3 cases rated as a Strength reviewers indicated that connections had been at least partially preserved. Reviewers generally noted that foster parents and relative caretakers assumed responsibility for maintaining children’s connections to their families and communities.

Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement for this item when reviewers determined that connections with the child’s biological families were only partially preserved or “not at all” preserved. In most of these cases, reviewers indicated that DHR did not follow up on contacts from biological relatives expressing interest in establishing a connection with the children in foster care or did not attempt to seek relatives in order to assist the child in preserving connections with family.

Determination and Discussion: Item 14 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 17 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that children’s connections to family, community culture, faith, and friends had/had not been adequately preserved while the children were in foster care. However, the problem pertaining to preserving connections appears to reflect an

inconsistency in practice among DHR workers rather than representing a typical practice pattern. In the majority of cases, workers and foster parents encouraged and supported the preservation of the children's connections. This practice is in accord with State policy that "encourages" placement of children in their own neighborhood or community and in a placement setting that sustains the child's existing relationships with family, friends, teachers, and neighbors. According to information in the Statewide Assessment, internal quality assurance findings reveal positive outcomes for foster children in placements that maintain connections with birth parents.

Item 15. Relative placement

☐ Strength ☒ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 15 was applicable for 29 of the 30 foster care cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made diligent efforts to locate and assess relatives (both maternal and paternal relatives) as potential placement resources for children when they enter foster care. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 15 was rated as a Strength in 19 (66%) of the 29 applicable cases.
- Item 15 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 10 (34%) of the 29 applicable cases.

Cases were rated as a Strength when reviewers determined that children were already placed with relatives (7 cases) or that children were not placed with relatives, but the agency had made diligent efforts to locate relatives and assess them as potential placement resources (12 cases). Of the 7 cases in which children were placed with relatives, the relative caretakers were either maternal grandparents or aunts/uncles (3 cases) or older sisters or brothers (4 cases).

Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that the agency had not made sufficient efforts to explore the possibility of relative placements, or when the agency had conducted only a limited exploration of potential relative placements, such as exploring maternal relatives but not paternal relatives.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that DHR has emphasized relative placements within the past 2 years. The agency now stresses the importance of kinship care and provides support to relative caregivers through the TANF-funded KinCare program. However, some stakeholders suggested that the first response of the agency is to place children in foster homes that are "known" entities rather than seek out and evaluate relative placements.

Several stakeholders also noted that DHR does not always make efforts to locate non-custodial fathers or paternal relatives as potential placement resources. A few stakeholders suggested that the agency is too quick to use the phrase “whereabouts unknown” in referring to fathers without making efforts to find the father. This perception was supported by the case record review finding that there were two cases in which the whereabouts of the father was reported to be “unknown” in the case record and by the caseworker, but foster parents or children told reviewers that they knew where the fathers were.

Determination and Discussion: Item 15 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because reviewers determined that in 34 percent of the cases, the agency had not made diligent efforts to locate and assess relatives as potential placement resources. According to the Statewide Assessment, the findings of focus groups revealed that greater efforts to locate relatives at the time that children come into DHR custody was perceived as having a positive impact on reunification.

Item 16. Relationship of child in care with parents

 Strength X Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 16 was applicable for 27 of the 30 foster care cases. A case was considered not applicable for an assessment of this item if parental rights had been terminated or if a relationship with the parents was considered to be not in the child’s best interest. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had made diligent efforts to maintain the bond between the child and both of his/her parents through visitation and provision of services designed to promote bonding. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 16 was rated as a Strength in 20 (74%) of the 27 applicable cases.
- Item 16 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 7 (26%) of the 27 applicable cases.

Cases were rated as a Strength when reviewers indicated that the agency had promoted bonding between mothers and their children (15 cases), and between fathers and their children (13 cases). Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that the agency had not supported sufficient visitation between the child and parents or when one of the parents had not been contacted by the agency.

The few stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that DHR is not consistent in its efforts to maintain or support the bond between children and their parents.

Discussion and Determination: Item 16 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 26 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the agency had not made sufficient efforts to support or maintain the bond between parents and their children while the children were in foster care. According to the Statewide Assessment, Family Planning Teams establish specific goals and steps to maintain relationships of children and parents through concrete visitation plans and services. However, it was not clear in the cases reviewed that services were put in place to support families when there were signs of weak bonding between a parent and child.

III. CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

Child and Family Well Being Outcome 1

Outcome WB1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Jefferson	Montgomery	Shelby	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	10	9	8	27	54.0
Partially Achieved:	7	4	4	15	30.0
Not Achieved or Addressed:	5	3	0	8	16.0
Not Applicable:	0	0	0	0	

STATUS OF WELL-BEING OUTCOME 1

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 1. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was rated as substantially achieved in only 54 percent of the case records reviewed, which is less than the 90 percent required for a determination of substantial conformity.

The findings of the CFSR review revealed considerable inconsistencies in DHR practice relevant to this outcome and resulted in all items pertaining to the outcome being assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement. For two items (17 and 18), agency workers were found to be inconsistent in implementing DHR policies pertaining to assessing and meeting the needs of all relevant parties involved in the case. For items 19 and 20, reviewers determined that in many cases, workers did not visit children or parents with sufficient frequency to ensure adequate monitoring of children's safety or promote progress toward attainment of children's permanency goals.

Findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Well-Being Outcome 1 are presented and discussed below.

Item 17. Needs and services of child, parents, foster parents

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 17 was applicable for all 50 cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the agency had (1) adequately assessed the needs of children, parents, and foster parents; and (2) provided the services necessary to meet those needs. The results were the following:

- Item 17 was rated as a Strength in 33 (66%) of the 50 cases (20 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 17 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 17 (34%) of the 50 cases (10 of which were foster care cases).

Reviewers made the following determinations from the case records and case-related interviews:

- Children's needs were assessed in 40 of the 50 applicable cases, and children received services appropriate to their needs in 36 of those cases.
- Mothers' needs were assessed and services provided in 28 of the 37 cases in which an assessment of mothers' needs was determined to be applicable.
- Fathers' needs were assessed and services provided in 16 of the 30 cases in which an assessment of fathers' needs was determined to be applicable.
- Foster parents' received services to meet their needs in 27 of the 30 foster care cases.

In general, cases were rated as a Strength for this item when there were no unmet assessment or service needs for children, mothers, and foster parents. However, in 5 of the cases assigned a rating of Strength, reviewers did note that there had been little or no assessment of fathers' needs or provision of services to fathers.

A rating of Area Needing Improvement was assigned to cases in which reviewers made the following determinations (more than one problem could be identified for each case).

- Assessment of needs was inadequate or non-existent (12 cases).
- Services to address identified needs were not implemented (10 cases).

For the 17 cases assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement, reviewers determined that the parents, foster parents, and children had service needs that were critical to the safety and well being of the children but that were neither assessed nor addressed. The services identified as needed but not provided included domestic violence services for parents, services to address the children's safety while visiting parents who were known perpetrators, services to meet children's educational needs and parent's mental health needs, services to assist the child in dealing with sexual abuse, services to address attachment issues, grief/loss counseling, services to address developmental delays, counseling services, psychological testing services, day care services, afterschool care services, services to address hyperactivity, respite services for foster parents, and behavioral management services for relative caretakers and foster parents.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue remarked on the inconsistencies in DHR practice with regard to needs assessment and service delivery. They noted that although the ISP process is designed as an ongoing forum for identifying the individualized needs of parents, children, and foster parents, in some cases, the ISP process is not sufficiently comprehensive to identify unique needs or underlying causes. When this occurs, stakeholders suggested that the resulting plan includes "boilerplate assessments" and "cookie cutter services" that are not individualized and do not change over time in response to progress or lack of progress in the cases.

Stakeholders expressed the opinion that although there are a number of services available through DHR, the quality and intensity of services is sometimes questionable. Stakeholders also reported that in some cases there is little follow-through with the recommendations of assessments conducted by professionals. This was confirmed by a case record review finding that some case records contained psychological evaluations or assessments with specific recommendations for services, but there was no evidence in the case record that the recommendations had been implemented.

Determination and Discussion. Item 17 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 34 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the needs and services of children, parents, and/or foster parents had not been, or were not being, adequately addressed by DHR. According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR policy requires the creation and documentation of an Individualized Service Plan (ISP) on each family receiving child welfare services. This comprehensive assessment includes the identification of strengths, risks, underlying conditions/needs that are creating the risks, and the identification and provision of services to address these underlying conditions/needs. In addition, the assessment and ISP promotes the identification and addressing of issues with regards to the well being of children in the areas of education, emotional health, and physical health. Findings of internal QA reviews demonstrate that attention is being given to identifying children's physical needs but that attention to identifying and addressing the emotional needs of children and families is still in the developmental stage.

Item 18. Child and family involvement in case planning

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 18 was applicable for all 50 cases. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether parents and children (if age appropriate) had been involved in the case planning process, and if not, whether their involvement was contrary to the child's best interest. A determination of involvement in case planning required that a parent had actively participated in identifying the services and goals included in the case plan. This assessment produced the following findings:

- Item 18 was rated as a Strength in 32 (64%) of the 50 applicable cases (23 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 18 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 18 (36%) of the 50 applicable cases (7 of which were foster care cases).

Through the case record assessments, reviewers determined the following:

- Mothers were appropriately involved in the case planning process in 27 cases. In 9 cases, the mother should have been involved but was not. There were 8 cases in which the mother was not available to participate and 6 cases in which the mother's participation was considered to be contrary to the child's best interest.
- Fathers were appropriately involved in the case planning process in 18 cases. In 16 cases, the father should have been involved, but was not. There were 14 cases in which the father was not available to participate and 2 cases in which the father's participation was considered to be contrary to the child's best interest.
- Children were appropriately involved in the case planning process in 18 cases. There were 10 cases in which the children were not involved although they were old enough to have been involved. There were 22 cases in which reviewers determined that the children were not old enough to participate in the case planning process.

In general, cases were assigned a rating of Strength for this item when reviewers determined that all relevant parties had actively participated in the case planning process. Cases were assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that one or more of the key parties had not been involved in the case planning process.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue noted that in DHR, case planning takes place in the Individualized Service Plan (ISP) process. This is a process in which workers bring together all relevant parties in a case at least every 6 months to assess case progress and current family strengths and service needs. The relevant parties include biological parents, foster parents, children, attorneys, guardians ad litem, private providers, teachers and other professionals involved with the family. Most stakeholders expressed the opinion that parents are routinely involved in this process, but that children, even when age appropriate, are not routinely involved. Other stakeholders, however, noted that children in foster care cases often are knowledgeable about the content of their ISP.

Stakeholders also reported that because so many people are included in the ISP meeting, the meetings can be difficult to schedule, and sometimes various key people cannot attend because of scheduling problems.

A few stakeholders suggested that DHR does not make sufficient efforts to locate family members for inclusion in the ISP process, particularly non-custodial parents and paternal relatives. These stakeholders noted, however, that DHR policy and training of DHR staff emphasize identification of fathers and other relatives and their inclusion whenever possible in the ISP process.

Determination and Discussion: Item 18 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 36 percent of the applicable case records, reviewers determined that DHR had not appropriately involved parents or children in the case planning process. This rating reflects inconsistencies in practice with respect to case planning rather than a typical DHR approach to case planning. There were many cases, for example, in which parents and children played a key role in the case plan development on an ongoing basis.

However, the finding that as many as 36 percent of the cases did not involve parents or children in case planning efforts is contrary to State DHR policy. The Statewide Assessment indicates that State policy requires that Individualized Service Plans (ISPs) must be devised in a Family Planning Team meeting, and teams must include family members, the social worker and those who are involved with the family. Active participation by the family in the assessment and planning process is required and considered best practice. The only exception to this is planning in cases where parental rights have been terminated. However, even in cases in which parental rights are terminated, family involvement is very often present in the planning prior to termination being sought, and continued involvement of the biological family is encouraged if possible.

Item 19. Worker visits with child

☐ Strength ☒ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 19 was applicable for all 50 case records. In conducting this assessment, reviewers were to determine whether the frequency of visits between caseworkers and children was sufficient to ensure adequate monitoring of the child's safety and well-being. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 19 was rated as a Strength in 31 (62%) of the 50 cases (20 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 19 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 19 (38%) of the 50 cases (10 of which were foster care cases).

Reviewers noted the following with respect to frequency of visits: In 5 cases, visits occurred once a week; in 9 cases visits typically occurred twice a month; in 13 cases, visits occurred on a monthly basis; and in 23 cases, visits occurred on a less than monthly basis. For 38 of the cases, reviewers determined that when workers visited with children, the content of the visits focused on issues pertinent to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength for this item when reviewers determined that the frequency of the workers' visits with children was sufficient to meet the child's needs and ensure adequate monitoring of the child's safety and well-being. In many cases, visits occurred frequently and workers implemented extra efforts to maintain contact with children in foster care by transporting them to medical appointments or other services.

Cases were assigned a rating of Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that the frequency of contact between workers and children was insufficient to meet the child's needs and ensure safety and well-being. In 8 cases, reviewers determined that the DHR workers relied too heavily on contracted service providers for information about the children rather than having face-to-face contact with family members themselves. In 6 cases, many months passed between the workers' visits with children in situations in which reviewers believed that the children were at risk of harm. Reviewers also noted that many workers tend to visit children at their day care centers or at school rather than visiting in the foster homes and consequently have little information about the foster home environment. In one case, the worker had not visited the foster home in 8 months. In addition, case record reviewers observed that casual contacts were frequently recorded as "visits" in case records.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that DHR needs to develop clear policy guidelines regarding the expectations concerning worker visits with children. This perception was supported by reviewers' observation that confusion in the field concerning the level of contact required by policy resulted in an inconsistency among workers in making meaningful face-to-face contacts with children to assess ongoing needs and safety risks or to monitor services. Stakeholders also expressed the opinion that workers tend to rely too heavily on providers to let them know what is going on in the family and often have no first-hand knowledge of home circumstances. This opinion was confirmed by findings from the case review process.

Determination and Discussion: Item 19 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 38 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that the frequency of caseworker visits with children was not sufficient to ensure adequate monitoring of the child's safety and well-being. Although this rating is consistent with stakeholders' perceptions, it is not consistent with information reported in the Statewide Assessment. According to the Statewide Assessment, although agency policy requires at least quarterly contact between the caseworker and children in agency custody, the frequency of contact is to be established in the ISP and is to depend on the needs of the child and family. Data reported in the Statewide Assessment indicate that the percentage of children

in custody who were seen at least once a month during fiscal year 2001 ranged from 84.6 to 92.4. In contrast, the case record review process found that workers visited children in DHR custody at least once a month in only 63 percent of the cases, and visited all children (including those in in-home services cases) at least once a month in only 54 percent of the cases.

Item 20. Worker visits with parents

___ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 20 was applicable for 43 of the 50 case records. Cases that were considered not applicable for an assessment of this item were those in which (1) parental rights had been terminated and the parents were no longer involved in planning for the child; or (2) the parents could not be located despite diligent efforts by the agency. Reviewers were to assess whether the caseworker had sufficient face-to-face contact with the mothers and fathers of the children to promote attainment of the child's permanency goal and ensure the child's safety and well-being. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 20 was rated as a Strength in 23 (53%) of the 43 applicable cases (16 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 20 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 20 (47%) of the 43 applicable cases (14 of which were foster care cases).

Specific findings of the review were the following:

- In 2 cases, parents were visited weekly
- In 5 cases, parents were visited twice a month
- In 8 cases, parents were visited monthly
- In 28 cases, parents were visited less than monthly

Cases were rated as a Strength if reviewers determined that visits with parents (1) were sufficiently frequent to address the parents' needs for visits; and (2) focused on issues pertaining to case planning, service delivery, and goal attainment. There were several cases that were rated as a Strength, however, in which reviewers commented that workers had made no effort to contact the child's father, even when his whereabouts was known.

Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that the frequency of contact between the worker and parents was insufficient to ensure the child's safety and well-being or to track the progress of the case toward the permanency goal. As with the issue of worker visits with children, reviewers determined that workers' reliance on contracted providers to keep them informed about the family was not appropriate to furthering attainment of the child's permanency goal. In some cases, the only face-to-face contact with the family occurred during the ISP family meeting which takes place once every 6 months.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue voiced the opinion that there is a need for greater policy guidance regarding worker visits with parents. Stakeholders noted that in many cases, visits between DHR workers and parents are not taking place with sufficient frequency, and DHR does not make efforts to locate non-custodial parents or custodial parents who have moved or have not attended an ISP meeting. Several stakeholders mentioned that when a child's goal becomes long-term foster care, workers discontinue their contact with parents even when there is ongoing visitation between parents and children.

Determination and Discussion: This item was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 47 percent of the cases, reviewers determined that visits with parents were not sufficiently frequent or of sufficient quality to promote the safety and well-being of the child or increase movement toward permanency for the child. Although there were many cases in which DHR workers were visiting parents with appropriate frequency, this practice was not consistent across cases.

Child Well-Being Outcome 2

Outcome WB2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Jefferson	Montgomery	Shelby	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	11	8	6	25	71.4
Partially Achieved:	4	2	0	6	17.2
Not Achieved or Addressed:	3	0	1	4	11.4
Not Applicable:	4	6	5	15	

STATUS OF WELL-BEING OUTCOME 2

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 2. This determination is based on the finding that only 71.4 percent of the case records reviewed were found to have substantially achieved this outcome, which is less than the 90 percent required for substantial conformity.

Findings for the item assessed for this outcome are presented below:

Item 21. Educational needs of the child

____ Strength __X__ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 21 was applicable for 35 of the 50 case records reviewed. Cases that were not applicable were those in which children were too young to be enrolled in school or preschool, or those in-home services cases in which the children did not have education-related issues. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether the child's educational needs were assessed and whether appropriate services were provided to meet those needs. The results of this assessment were the following:

- Item 21 was rated as a Strength in 25 (71%) of the 35 applicable cases (19 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 21 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 10 (29%) of the 35 applicable cases (4 of which were foster care cases).

Reviewers reported the following findings for foster care cases:

- 23 of the 30 foster care cases were applicable for an assessment of item 21 because children were of preschool or school age.
- In 4 of the 23 applicable foster care cases, the child experienced multiple school changes as a result of being in foster care.
- Educational needs were assessed in 22 of the 23 applicable foster care cases and not assessed in 1 case.
- Services were provided to meet educational needs in 14 of the 23 applicable foster care cases, services were not necessary in 6 cases, and services were not provided in 3 of the applicable foster care cases.
- In 18 cases, either the worker or the foster parent advocated with the schools on behalf of the children.
- 13 of the 23 applicable foster care cases had school records in the file, two cases did not have school records in the case file, and in 8 cases the reviewer did not indicate if school records were in the case file.
- In 7 of the foster care cases, foster parents or relative caregivers received school records at the time of placement, in 3 cases foster parents did not receive school records, and in 13 cases, reviewers did not indicate whether foster parents had received school records.

Additional findings pertaining to in-home services cases were the following:

- 14 of the 20 in-home services cases were applicable for an assessment of item 21.
- Educational needs were assessed in 11 of the 14 cases and not assessed in 3 cases.
- Educational services were provided in 10 of the 14 cases and not provided in 4 cases.

Cases were rated as a Strength for this item when reviewers determined that DHR (through workers or foster parents) was actively involved in assessing children's educational needs, advocating for services to meet children's educational needs, and/or referring

children for services to meet their educational needs. Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement when reviewers determined that DHR had not made sufficient efforts to either assess educational needs or arrange for provision of services to meet identified needs.

Some stakeholders commenting on this issue indicated that meeting educational needs for children in foster care can be problematic because the relationships between the agency and the local school systems are not always positive in some communities. A few stakeholders suggested that foster parents and workers would benefit from training on how to effectively advocate for children with the school system. Other stakeholders noted that DHR workers and foster parents participate in school-run IEP meetings on a routine basis.

Determination and Discussion: Item 21 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 29 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DHR was not effectively addressing children’s educational needs. This finding is not consistent with information in the Statewide Assessment indicating that in all cases, children are to have a comprehensive assessment that addresses each child’s educational situation and includes information regarding academic performance and reading level, social interaction with peers and school faculty, and involvement in extra-curricula activities. Caseworkers are expected to advocate for children in the educational arena. This includes ensuring evaluation/testing (when needed), appropriate school placement and specialized services. Caseworkers are required to participate in Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings for all foster children receiving special education services and maintain a copy of the plan in the child’s record.

Child Well-Being Outcome 3

Outcome WB3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.					
Number of cases reviewed by the team according to degree of outcome achievement:					
	Jefferson	Montgomery	Shelby	Total Number	Total Percentage
Substantially Achieved:	13	11	12	36	75.0
Partially Achieved:	3	2	0	5	10.5
Not Achieved or Addressed:	5	2	0	7	14.5
Not Applicable:	1	1	0	2	

STATUS OF WELL-BEING OUTCOME 3

Alabama did not achieve substantial conformity with Well-Being Outcome 3. This determination was based on the finding that the outcome was rated as substantially achieved in 75 percent of the applicable cases, which is less than the 90 percent required for a determination of substantial conformity.

The primary finding of the CFSR process was that DHR is effective in addressing the physical health needs of children, but not in addressing their mental health needs. Findings pertaining to the specific items assessed under Well-Being Outcome 3 are presented and discussed below.

Item 22. Physical health of the child

☒ X Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 22 was applicable for 39 of the 50 case records reviewed. Cases that were not applicable for this assessment were in-home services cases for which no physical health issues were identified. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether (1) children's physical health needs had been appropriately assessed, and (2) the services designed to meet those needs had been, or were being, provided. The findings of this assessment were the following:

- Item 22 was rated as a Strength in 33 (85%) of the 39 applicable cases (27 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 22 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 6 (15%) of the 39 applicable cases (3 of which were foster care cases).

Cases were rated as a Strength for this item when the children's health needs were routinely assessed and appropriate services provided as needed. For in-home cases, a rating of Strength was assigned when the agency worker had assessed the health needs of the children and/or assisted the family in accessing health-related services.

Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement for in-home cases when reviewers determined that the children in the family had needs for health services that were not being addressed by DHR, for example, children in the home had not had medical or dental exams in years (1 case), did not have up to date immunizations (1 case), or had a significant health problem that was not assessed (1 case). Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement in foster care cases when the child had not had dental care in over a year (1 case), when the agency did not follow up on a recommendation from a dental provider regarding care for the child (1 case), or when there was no documentation in the case record of medical or dental assessments (1 case).

Stakeholders commenting on the issue of meeting children’s health needs spoke primarily about availability or lack of available services in some areas. These comments are presented in Section VIII, Service Array.

Determination and Discussion: Item 22 was assigned an overall rating of Strength based on the finding that in 85 percent of the applicable case records, reviewers determined that DHR’s efforts to address the physical health needs of children were adequate. This finding is consistent with information in the Statewide Assessment regarding health services for children in foster care. According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR policy requires that all children receive a medical examination 10 days or less after coming into custody. The management information system, called ACWIS, alerts the worker and supervisor if the medical is overdue. Yearly medical exams are required under agency policy for all children in custody. Workers are encouraged to have EPSDT examinations for all Medicaid eligible children in their caseload. EPSDT dates are tracked in the individual counties. Children with special physical needs can receive specialized care in Medically Fragile foster homes.

Item 23. Mental health of the child

☐ Strength ☒ Area Needing Improvement

Review Findings: An assessment of item 23 was applicable for 39 of the 50 case records. Cases that were not applicable were foster care cases in which the child was too young for an assessment of mental health needs, and in-home services cases in which the children’s mental health needs were not an issue. In assessing this item, reviewers were to determine whether (1) mental health needs had been appropriately assessed and (2) services to address those needs had been provided. The findings of this assessment were the following:

- Item 23 was rated as a Strength in 29 (74%) of the 39 applicable cases (20 of which were foster care cases).
- Item 23 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement in 10 (26%) of the 39 applicable cases (4 of which were foster care cases).

There were two basic elements to be rated for this item – one element concerned whether mental health needs were assessed and the other concerned whether mental health services were provided. For the 39 applicable cases, reviewers noted that children’s mental health needs were “significantly” assessed in 30 cases, “partially” assessed in 4 cases, and “not at all” assessed in 5 cases. Reviewers also reported that mental health needs were “significantly” met in 25 cases, “partially” met in 6 cases, and “not at all” met in 5 cases, and not applicable in 3 cases because no mental health needs were identified as a result of the assessment.

Cases were assigned a rating of Strength for 25 cases in which reviewers determined that mental health needs were “significantly” assessed and the identified needs for services were “significantly” met (25 cases). Two cases were assigned a rating of Strength when the reviewer determined that mental health needs were significantly assessed but only partially provided, and three cases were rated as a Strength when reviewers noted that mental health needs had been significantly assessed, but no services were needed. In one county included in the on-site CFSR process, mental health needs were found to have been assessed and adequately met in all cases.

Cases were rated as an Area Needing Improvement for this item when reviewers determined that assessments and services were provided only partially (6 cases) or not at all (4 cases). In some of these cases, there were psychological evaluations and assessments in the records, but the agency had not followed up on the recommendations made in these assessments. In 4 in-home services cases, reviewers determined that there were strong indications that a mental health assessment was needed, but the agency did not provide one.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed concern about the quality of mental health services that children were receiving. Stakeholders also commented on the availability of mental health services in various communities in the State. These comments are presented under item 35 in the discussion of the systemic factor of Service Array.

Determination and Discussion: Item 23 was assigned an overall rating of Area Needing Improvement because in 26 percent of the applicable cases, reviewers determined that DHR was not adequately addressing children’s mental health assessment and service needs. According to the Statewide Assessment, caseworkers are expected to identify underlying needs and conditions that affect a child’s safety and well being. It was noted in the Statewide assessment that DHR provides specialized training for workers to enhance their ability to identify underlying conditions in order to support them in their efforts to address issues pertaining to the emotional well-being of children and their families.

SECTION 2: SYSTEMIC FACTORS

IV. STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
Rating	1	2	3	4X

STATUS OF STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Statewide Information System. Findings with respect to the item assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 24. State is operating a statewide information system that, at a minimum, can readily identify the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child who is (or within the immediately preceding 12 months, has been) in foster care.

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

This item is rated as a Strength because the State's information system can provide all of the demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child in foster care.

According to the Statewide Assessment and Stakeholder interviews, Alabama currently uses multiple information systems, all of which will eventually be replaced with a Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS). The Statewide Assessment noted that Alabama's legacy systems, while being a rich source of historical placement data, do not provide caseworkers, supervisors, managers, or administrators with the information or tools needed to support or evaluate case practice. System and data maintenance activities are labor intensive and there are numerous opportunities for error as a result of data inconsistencies. The various systems do not share common data sets, and redundant data entry is required across systems.

Despite the numerous problems inherent in having multiple systems, stakeholders noted that the existing legacy systems have been sufficient for identifying the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child who is (or within the immediately preceding 12 months, has been) in foster care. The foster care workers use FSS (Family Services System) for entering basic demographic information, and ACWIS is used to track case actions, such as ISP dates, custody status, judicial review dates, and permanency goals. Also, the counties have developed individual internal tracking and monitoring systems.

DHR believes that the SACWIS, once it is fully implemented, will replace both the current State systems and the individual county systems. The Alabama SACWIS is called the Alabama Social Services Information System (ASSIST). ASSIST is planned as a comprehensive, integrated and worker-driven system that will be user-friendly and capable of capturing management information needs. According to the Statewide Assessment, ASSIST will provide reports that can be used to measure outcomes in each of the counties.

During April - November 2001 Release I of ASSIST (the first phase) was implemented Statewide. This phase includes Protective Services Reports, Investigations, Information and Referral, and Screening and Constituent Complaints. A help desk and a mentor program supported implementation. County Directors indicated that ASSIST, along with the remaining legacy systems, is providing accurate and useful information. Implementation of the second phase is planned for the near future.

Stakeholders expressed the opinion that it is difficult to assess the impact of the ASSIST implementation at this time because all of the legacy systems are still being used and because local offices have developed their own databases for tracking purposes and continue to use them, even with Release I of ASSIST in place. Stakeholders suggested that one of the key advantages of ASSIST at this time is that it can identify prior child abuse and neglect reports on a family.

V. CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
	1	2X	3	4

STATUS OF CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Alabama is not in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Case Review System. Findings with regard to specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 25. Provides a process that ensures that each child has a written case plan to be developed jointly with the child's parent(s) that includes the required provisions.

☐ Strength ☒ Area Needing Improvement

Item 25 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement because although DHR has a process in place for the joint development by parents, children, DHR, and other stakeholders of a written case plan, evidence from the case record reviews and comments by several stakeholders suggest that DHR practice is inconsistent with regard to the involvement of parents in the case planning process.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR has established a formal process to ensure that each child has a written case plan. This process is the Family Planning Team Meeting, which serves as the basis for developing the ISP (Individualized Service Plan). In the Family Planning Team Meeting, the agency, family, and other key parties jointly engage in the preparation of a written, comprehensive assessment, statement of goals, and statement of action plans to achieve goals. This written report is the ISP, and the content of the ISP drives all future case activity. The Statewide Assessment indicates that DHR policy requires that the Family Planning Team meeting must include family members, the social worker and relevant stakeholders who are involved with the family. Stakeholders in one county included in the CFSR noted that the judge in the county requires that all attorneys involved in the case, including the guardian ad litem (GAL) must be invited to the Family Planning Team Meeting and must be involved in development of the ISP. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, active participation by the family in the assessment and planning process is required and considered best practice. The only exception to this is planning in cases where parental rights have been terminated. However,

even in cases in which parental rights are terminated, family involvement is very often present in the planning prior to termination being sought, and continued involvement of the biological family is encouraged if possible. The Statewide Assessment also notes that emphasis is placed on locating absent parents and identifying extended family members to be included on the Family Planning Team. Caseworkers are expected to facilitate the planning process and ensure the involvement of family as well as other stakeholders.

Although the Statewide Assessment reports that family participation in case planning is a strength in Alabama's child welfare system and occurs in an extremely high number of cases Statewide, information from stakeholders and case record reviews indicates that the involvement of parents, relatives, and children in the Family Planning Team Meeting is inconsistent, and active efforts to locate absent parents and identifying extended family members to be included on the Family Planning Team were not evident in the cases reviewed. As noted under item 18, case record reviewers indicated that in 36 percent of the applicable cases, relevant family members were not involved in the case planning process. In addition, several stakeholders expressed concern about the quality of many of the Family Planning Team meetings and the resulting ISPs.

The primary concern expressed by a few stakeholders regarding the ISP as a case review process is that while the process often is effective in identifying individualized service needs and strengths, it is not always used as a tool for moving children toward permanency. Stakeholders also noted that the overall effectiveness of the ISP depends on the experience and expertise of the DHR worker, which varies considerably.

Item 26. Provides a process for the periodic review of the status of each child, no less frequently than once every 6 months, either by a court or by administrative review.

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Item 26 was rated as a Strength because information gathered during the onsite review and the Statewide Assessment indicates that the State has a process in place for periodic reviews of the status of each child no less frequently than once every 6 months, and that these reviews usually are conducted in a timely manner.

According to the Statewide Assessment, the State DHR requires that counties conduct a periodic review of the status of each child in foster care at least once every 6 months and that most counties meet this requirement through a court review, although a few counties prefer to conduct an administrative case review, which is usually combined with the ISP process. In addition, DHR policy requires that the ISP must be reviewed and updated at least every 6 months.

The case review requirement is tracked by the ACWIS system. Each worker receives a monthly listing of “Actions Due” in his or her caseload. It is the supervisor’s responsibility to ensure that the worker completes the activity. The courts also play a role in ensuring that reviews are completed on time in those counties using a court review process. In the majority of these counties, the court clerk schedules the reviews and notifies the county DHR office if the report is not submitted on time.

As noted in the Statewide Assessment, DHR believes that case reviews are being conducted regularly, but is concerned that they are not consistently effective in moving children toward permanency. There are guidelines that are addressed and discussed, but they seem to be more of a “review” of past activities than planning and directing activities for the future. The perception of rapid movement toward permanency as a problem for the State was confirmed in the case record review process, which found that in many cases, permanency was not achieved in a timely manner.

Stakeholders’ comments on this issue were consistent with information reported in the Statewide Assessment. However, stakeholders were inconsistent in their perceptions of the timeliness of reviews. Stakeholders in one county reported that reviews were held in a timely manner, while those in another county noted that reviews were not held on time.

Item 27. Provides a process that ensures that each child in foster care under the supervision of the State has a permanency hearing in a qualified court or administrative body no later than 12 months from the date the child entered foster care and no less frequently than every 12 months thereafter.

☐ Strength ☒ Area Needing Improvement

Item 27 was rated as an Area Needing Improvement because the Statewide Assessment and information gathered during the onsite review indicate that although the State has a process in place for permanency hearings, a significant number are not conducted in a timely manner.

According to the Statewide Assessment, Alabama has made changes in State law to require permanency hearings for children every 12 months. The ACWIS system tracks compliance with the requirement that a permanency hearing be held within 12 months of the child entering custody, but does not track compliance with the timeframes in cases of abandonment or findings of reasonable efforts not being required. The system generates a notice to the worker and the supervisor three months in advance alerting them to the upcoming requirement. Another notice is generated each month until the hearing is due. If the hearing is not held, an exception is generated the following month, alerting both the supervisor and worker that the requirement has not been met. Many counties have their own system to track the permanency hearing requirement.

The Statewide Assessment reported that for the 4,823 children in out-of-home care as of 8/31/01, there were 263 with a delinquent permanency hearing. It was also observed, however, that some of the 263 children may have had permanency hearings but there has been a delay in data entry.

Stakeholders expressed the opinion that permanency hearings are actually held every 6 months, although the 12-month hearing may be more formal than the 6-month hearing. Some stakeholders expressed concern that the permanency hearings are really just a formality and that there is not a lot of input obtained from foster parents, parents, or children that might be useful for expediting the attainment of permanency. Because of the potential for a pending criminal case to delay a child welfare case, one county included in the CFSR's introduced a protocol for all criminal prosecutions called "Rocket Docket" to expedite criminal court proceedings that might potentially delay the child welfare hearings.

Item 28. Provides a process for termination of parental rights proceedings in accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act.

☐ Strength ☒ Area Needing Improvement

Item 28 is rated as an Area Needing Improvement because although there is a process for TPR proceedings, case record interviews and stakeholder comments suggest that these proceedings are not always implemented in accordance with the provisions of ASFA. For example, 20 of the 30 children in foster care had been in care for 15 of the most recent 22 months at the time of the case record review. Yet TPR had only been filed in 9 cases, and adoption was the goal in only 9 cases. According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR does provide a process for termination of parental rights (TPR) proceedings in accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). The FSP data system prompts workers when permanency hearings are due so that they can adhere to the 15 month timeframe requirements. However, according to the Statewide Assessment, responsiveness to the ASFA timelines varies among the counties and among the courts.

The decision on whether to pursue TPR or whether there is a compelling reason not to file for TPR is made within the ISP context. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, one of the frequently used compelling reasons not to terminate parental rights is based on the time required for rehabilitation in cases involving parental substance abuse or addiction.

Stakeholders were in general agreement that the courts and the agency are aware of ASFA policy. DHR and attorneys provide training on ASFA, and both the courts and DHR are aware of and use the appropriate exceptions for not filing for TPR. However, stakeholders were not in agreement regarding the timeliness of TPR filings. In one county, stakeholders reported

that DHR files for TPR in a timely manner, and although many of the TPR petitions go to appeal, none of them have been overturned. In this county, it was noted that the appeal process can delay attainment of TPR for about 6 months. In the two other counties, however, stakeholders noted that the ASFA timelines for filing for TPR are not observed and that there are delays in reaching decisions to seek TPR and in filing the petitions. In addition, when appeals are filed in these counties it was noted that the appeal process could delay attainment of TPR for 12 months or more. Stakeholders in these counties suggested that “parents are given too many opportunities” and that the agency does not address the issue of possible TPR with the parents early on in the case.

Agency stakeholders suggested that there are judges who are hesitant to terminate parental rights and attorneys who are hesitant to take a TPR petition to court. These stakeholders also indicated that the issue of timeliness of filing for TPR will be addressed by the new permanency specialist position established at the State level to work with counties in meeting TPR timelines and moving children toward permanency.

Case record review information indicated that delays in TPR filing were primarily the result of the workers’ reluctance to seek TPR and change a goal from reunification, or even long term foster care, to adoption.

Item 29. Provides a process for foster parents, preadoptive parents, and relative caregivers of children in foster care to be notified of, and have an opportunity to be heard in, any review or hearing held with respect to the child.

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Item 29 is rated as a Strength because State law and agency policy require workers to give notification in writing to foster and adoptive parents and related caregivers of scheduled hearings and their right to attend and training has been provided to foster parents to support their participation.

According to the Statewide Assessment, agency policy encourages foster parent participation in administrative reviews, permanency hearings, and case planning meetings. Information in the Statewide Assessment also provided the findings of a recent survey of foster and adoptive parents with respect to notification of court hearings. According to this survey, 90 percent of foster and adoptive parents who responded indicated that they were notified of court hearings regarding a child in their care; 73 percent said that there was a method in place to incorporate their input into decisions or recommendations, and 66 percent indicated that special efforts were made to engage them in the process through training or written materials about their role. In addition, 66 percent of the respondents indicated that they had participated in a court hearing for a child in their home.

Comments from stakeholders on this issue were generally consistent with information in the Statewide Assessment; however, some stakeholders suggested that although there are provisions for notifying foster parents about reviews and hearings, there are many times when notifications are not received. In addition, stakeholders in one county included in the CFSR process said that the judge in that county does not allow foster parents to attend or participate in court hearings and that, in general, access to court hearings is very limited. In another county, stakeholders reported that all parties are notified of hearings, but foster parents are not encouraged to participate. In the third county, stakeholders indicated that foster parents do not receive written notice of hearings, but both judges and foster parents said that foster parents are given the opportunity to be heard if they attend the hearing. One stakeholder suggested that there is confusion among judges about what the term “opportunity to be heard” means. Judges were not clear whether it meant that foster parents are to appear as witnesses, or that they should submit written reports.

VI. QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
	1	2	3	4X

STATUS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Quality Assurance System. Findings with respect to the specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 30. The State has developed and implemented standards to ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services that protect the safety and health of the children.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 30 is rated as a Strength because the Statewide Assessment and information gathered during the onsite review indicate that the State has implemented standards and has a process in place to monitor compliance with the standards.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue suggested that the State has developed and implemented standards to ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services that protect the safety and health of the children. However, stakeholders also suggested that the standard pertaining to the frequency of contacts with the children and the foster parents may not be sufficient to ensure effective monitoring of the status of the child or the needs of the foster parents.

In addition, Alabama has a very good screening tool for assessing foster homes and determining that the family will provide quality care for the children placed in their home. DHR is trying to further ensure the safety of children in care by increasing the training requirements of foster parents. When the new standards go into effect, all foster parents will be required to be certified in cardiopulmonary resuscitation. They will have to be re-certified on an annual basis. Additional training, based on their interests and/or the types of children they care for, will also be required. Foster Homes are routinely interviewed during local and state quality assurance reviews. Resource social workers are also required to have quarterly contact with the foster parents while there are children in the home. This is in addition to the contacts made by the child's social worker. Frequent contacts help to keep the Department aware of conditions in the home and the type of care the children receive.

Item 31. The State is operating an identifiable quality assurance system that is in place in the jurisdictions where the services included in the CFSP are provided, evaluates the quality of services, identifies strengths and needs of the service delivery system, provides relevant reports, and evaluates program improvement measures implemented.

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Item 31 is rated as a Strength because the State is operating a comprehensive QA system in collaboration with community stakeholders that identifies practice and policy issues, provides reports to relevant stakeholders, evaluates the quality of services provided, identifies gaps in services, recommends corrective actions and provides for collaboration with communities to meet service gaps.

According to the Statewide Assessment, the DHR Quality Assurance (QA) system monitors and evaluates the operations of the agency and provides feedback on its performance, specifically its effectiveness in meeting the individual needs of children and their families. Alabama's QA system is comprised of the Office of Quality Assurance in the Family Services Partnership; a State QA Committee that includes representatives of DHR and stakeholders representing other interests and entities in the State; a QA coordinator in each County Department; and a local QA Committee in each county consisting of representatives of the County

Department and community stakeholders. The QA system involves the community as partners in conducting the following reviews and activities:

- Assess outcomes experienced by children and families who receive DHR services in the areas of safety, permanency and child well-being.
- Assess the adequacy of major systemic factors that affect DHR's capacity to deliver services to promote improved outcomes for children and families, such as community collaboration, service array/resource development, individualized service planning (ISPs), QA and supervision, staff and provider training, staffing and caseloads, and information system capacity.
- Review programs for consistency with applicable Federal, State, and Department policies.
- Assess the service delivery system to identify strengths and barriers to effective performance.
- Recommend corrective actions that address barriers to improved service delivery.

County QA coordinators provide quarterly reports to the State Office of Quality Assurance. County QA reports from the County Department and the county QA committees are designed in part to promote on-going self-evaluation in key practice and systemic areas. The reports are to be used by the county to self-monitor progress in key areas. The Office of Data Analysis, in conjunction with the Office of Quality Assurance, is responsible for preparing cumulative reports, which include information from the county reports, and submitting them to the Department's administration and program partnerships, the court monitor, the State QA committee, and others as deemed appropriate by the Department's administration.

Information gathered and reported in QA review reports is disseminated to administrators, supervisors and staff so that best practices can be identified and replicated, while areas needing improvement are targeted for attention. Technical assistance is available to counties in improving practice where QA identifies needs for improvement.

Local QA teams are also required to complete case reviews on a regular basis. These case reviews consist of record reviews and interviews with the family and other stakeholders. In addition to these reviews, line supervisors are required to perform systematic record reviews on cases in their respective units. Also, State Consultants are assigned to provide assistance to counties where needed. This assistance consists of case consultation, participation in ISP team meetings, and record review. This system is outcome focused. The primary areas of focus are identification and response to immediate safety needs, the proper identification of the underlying conditions/needs of the family, the achievement of effective permanency and well-being outcomes, and the appropriateness/effectiveness of the ISP process in identifying the need for and provision of services and interventions.

Stakeholders were unanimous in their praise for the State and local QA systems and their perceptions of QA as a clear strength for the State. At each county, stakeholders praised their local QA Committees both for their work in identifying practice and policy issues

and for their efforts to collaborate with other community agencies to meet service gaps. For example, in one county, the QA team is working with DHR and community partners to establish a Therapeutic Community for drug involved mothers with children in the home.

Stakeholders also indicated that workers value the QA process, although it was noted that workers sometimes feel that the feedback is not always received in a timely manner, and that sometimes the QA Committee members do not have an in-depth understanding of what goes on at the frontline level.

Stakeholders at the State level suggested that they would like to be able to offer more technical assistance to counties after the QA reviews. In terms of timely provision of review findings, one strategy that has been employed after some reviews has been to forward draft recommendations back to counties within a few weeks of a review so that a county will have an early sense of the issues to address. Also, state QA staff has, in the past, gone to counties approximately 4-6 weeks after a review with a draft copy of the report to discuss it with the counties. Finally, the county QA coordinator and county QA committee chairperson are typically involved in the on-site de-briefing sessions conducted by state QA, so the county/QA committee both are generally aware of the tentative review findings as the on-site review is concluded. However they would like to do more with the counties, including ensuring that there is a feedback system that is consistently implemented and have a database that tracks QA findings across the State. State level stakeholders also want to be able to ensure that the feedback system developed at the State level relative to state office issues are more formalized and that effective feedback systems for both counties and the state office are sustained beyond the conversion period (the conversion required under the RC Consent Decree).

VII. TRAINING

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
Rating	1	2	3X	4

STATUS OF TRAINING

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Training. Findings with respect to items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 32. The State is operating a staff development and training program that supports the goals and objectives in the CFSP, addresses services provided under titles IV-B and IV-E, and provides initial training for all staff who deliver these services.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 32 is assigned a rating of Strength because the State provides a comprehensive training program for all staff that supports the system of care and is based on staff needs.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR operates a basic skills training for staff called Alabama Child Welfare Training I (ACT I). ACT I consists of seven weeks of training – 3 weeks of classroom sessions provided in the four regions of the State, and 4 weeks of on-the-job-training completed in the counties under the guidance of the worker’s supervisor. The training weeks rotate so that training participants are on-the-job one week, in the classroom the next week, and then back out on the job the following week. Part of the on-the-job training component is the Professional Development Plan that workers complete with their supervisors; the PDP addresses the workers’ skill levels with regard to the Individualized Service Planning Process.

Training focuses on working with families to engage them in services, in goal setting, and in the ISP process in general. Training also is provided on understanding the underlying causes and consequences of child maltreatment. According to the Statewide Assessment, there are currently approximately 500 workers who need ACT I training [Note: The State is requiring all staff to complete ACT I, so some of those waiting are experienced workers, while some are new hires]. New child welfare workers are scheduled for ACT by the counties as soon as they are hired. There is generally a 3-6 month period when new staff receive coaching and guidance in the county before they come to ACT. The Statewide Assessment noted that staff turnover has created a dilemma with scheduling. Recently several new trainers have been added to the Office of Child Welfare Training. There are currently 12 trainers, and FSP hopes to have 14 trainers by the end of 2002.

Training participants complete evaluations that are assessed to determine if changes are needed. Based upon these evaluations, the training content could be expanded, shortened, or otherwise revised to better meet the participants’ needs. Training also is revised on an ongoing basis to incorporate current policies and laws as well as “best practice.”

As noted in the Statewide Assessment, some problems have been identified with respect to the ability of supervisors to support line workers while they are in training. Some supervisors are not able to complete the on-the-job training component with their workers,

while some workers have not received the work relief (caseload reduction) needed while they are in training. This is a key concern for DHR because through exit interviews with caseworkers leaving the system, they have identified issues with supervisors as one reason for staff turnover.

Stakeholders commenting on staff training expressed the opinion that ACT I is a high quality, comprehensive training. Stakeholders were particularly strong in their praise of the system-oriented aspect of ACT I – i.e., that it is geared to the way the State operates its child welfare system. For example, as part of ACT, participants conduct a mock Family Team Meeting and construct an ISP from that meeting.

County stakeholders noted that prior to attending ACT I training, the workers receive local training from their supervisors and from other workers through “shadowing.” However, there was some discrepancies among stakeholders with regard to the issue of accessibility of ACT I training. State level stakeholders indicated that the 3-6 month delay in training for new hires is due to counties wanting the new workers to receive local level training first. These stakeholders reported that workers can be scheduled for ACT training within 1 to 2 weeks of a county’s request. However, county stakeholders suggested that the delay in training is due to a lack of available training slots, and in one county, a stakeholder said that some workers have waited up to 12 months for ACT training. Stakeholders also were mixed in their perceptions of whether workers are assigned a full caseload prior to receiving training. Some stakeholders expressed the opinion that this does not happen, while others noted that it does occur in some counties.

The major concerns about the training effort focused on the on-the-job component. Stakeholders suggested that the level of support and guidance from supervisors when workers return to the office after classroom training is not consistent either across or within counties, and that supervisors do not always pay sufficient attention to the on the job component of ACT. Agency stakeholders indicated that they are aware of this problem and are trying to address it through more extensive supervisor training.

Item 33. The State provides for ongoing training for staff that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to the services included in the CFSP.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 33 is rated as a Strength because the State provides ongoing training through multiple State and local opportunities that address staff skill needs.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR offers advanced training through ACT II. The current course topics are: Practical Child Protection, the ISP Process for the Family who Experiences Substance Abuse, Practical Child Sexual Abuse Training, Supervisor's Training, and Underlying Conditions. However, ACT II training programs are available only to workers who have responsibilities in the areas that these programs cover. Workers are scheduled for Act II courses at the discretion of the County Director. The agency also is working on developing training in the area of permanency and concurrent planning and a full-time staff person has been hired to provide substance abuse training. "Underlying Conditions" training is conducted with an internal county consultant so that consultants can reinforce practice when they go into the counties that receive this training.

DHR also encourages staff to continue their education by providing educational leave and by coordinating with Schools of Social Work in the State. Thirty employees have been approved for full-time education leave for the June 2001 through May 2002 program year. Interagency agreements with eleven social work programs to provide for student stipends to train potential new workers are in place for the fall semester. One agreement is pending. The interagency agreement with the University of Alabama that provides MSW classes in Mobile is approved. A survey of central Alabama regarding a similar MSW program in Montgomery has been completed.

Stakeholders noted that licensed staff must have 30 hours of training every 2 years to maintain their license. Stakeholders in the counties included in the CFSR onsite review suggested that there are multiple training opportunities available both through the State training (ACT II), or in the community. Internal stakeholders expressed the opinion that it may be beneficial for the State to pay for training that is not directly sponsored by the agency.

Stakeholders noted that in addition to ACT II courses, ongoing training is available at the county level by Attorneys (on ASFA) and law enforcement, and that in service training is provided by supervisors. In addition, staff can make requests for training on special topics from the RC consultant. Stakeholders also noted that although courses are being developed on concurrent planning and permanency for ACT II, this information needs to be part of the basic training as well, since these concepts are integral to the ISP development process.

Item 34. The State provides training for current or prospective foster parents, adoptive parents, and staff of State licensed or approved facilities that care for children receiving foster care or adoption assistance under title IV-E that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties with regard to foster and adopted children.

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Item 34 was assigned a rating of Strength because the State provides current and prospective foster and adoptive parents quality training that prepares them to effectively parent children in their care.

The State training for foster and adoptive parents is the Group Preparation and Selection Process for Prospective Foster and/or Adoptive Families (GPS). As noted in the Statewide Assessment, this is Alabama's beginning tool in preparing prospective families as resources for foster care and adoption. As policies or laws change, such as MEPA, the program is revised to comply. The Family Finders Project provides the GPS training and is able to regionalize the process and have sessions available on a more consistent basis so that potential resource families do not have to wait a long period of time for a session to be scheduled. Additionally, Family Finders and county staff are trained in the Deciding Together program, which essentially is GPS for one family. This enables Family Finders or the county staff to take the Preparation and Selection program to the family. As noted in the Statewide Assessment, a survey of foster and adoptive parents revealed that they viewed the GPS as an excellent training program, and that the program gave them the basic information they needed to be successful in parenting the children.

Stakeholders opinions regarding the GPS training were consistent with information provided in the Statewide Assessment. Stakeholders indicated that the training is excellent in preparing foster parents to care for children, that foster parents and adoptive parents are trained together, and that DHR staff attend at least 3 of the GPS training sessions. Stakeholders also noted that foster parents must have 30 hours of GPS training to be licensed, and therapeutic foster parents must have 10 additional hours, plus 10 hours every year. Foster parents interviewed as part of the CFSR process were very complimentary about the GPS training.

Stakeholders noted that new guidelines are being developed that will require 15 hours of in-service training for foster parents each year. At present, there are no ongoing training requirements, although many foster parents participate in training offered by resources in their communities.

VIII. SERVICE ARRAY

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
	1	2	3	4X

STATUS OF SERVICE ARRAY

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of service array. Findings pertaining to the specific items relevant to this factor are presented and discussed below.

Item 35. The State has in place an array of services that assess the strengths and needs of children and families and determine other service needs, address the needs of families in addition to individual children in order to create a safe home environment, enable children to remain safely with their parents when reasonable, and help children in foster and adoptive placements achieve permanency.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 35 is rated as a Strength because there is an array of services available to address the needs of children and families.

According to the Statewide Assessment, the State has a wide variety of services to aid children and families. Intervention services may include, but are not limited to, in-home services to improve parent/child behaviors that contribute to the level of risk; assessment services to determine the causes of the abuse/neglect; and advocacy services for education and or mental health as well as individualized mental health services to meet identified needs. Some specific services include, among others: Family Options (family preservation and reunification services); family service centers; homemaker and case aide services; behavioral aides; and Multi-systemic Therapy (intensive, home-based approach to case management and therapy for families that remain intact or where reunification is the goal).

The Statewide Assessment also notes that the State has a variety of foster care settings to meet the individual needs of children. In addition to traditional foster homes, DHR has worked with child placing agencies to develop homes to provide enhanced foster care for larger sibling groups and foster care homes that work more intensely with birth families. Shelters, group homes, childcare institutions, residential treatment facilities and hospitalization are other placement resources. Therapeutic foster care (TFC) programs have significantly increased over the past five years and provide placement services to children in less restrictive environments in or near their home communities. Approximately 950 children (20% of all children in foster care) are in TFC placements at this time. Several programs in the state are providing assessment homes for short-term placements for children whose unique needs have not been adequately assessed and identified to make a good match.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed opinions that were consistent with the information provided in the Statewide Assessment. Basically, stakeholders indicated that there is a large array of services available for DHR to access for its clients and that DHR has been extremely effective in ensuring that resources are available for families. Special praise was accorded to the

Independent Living program for older children and the Family Options program designed to keep families together while maintaining the children's safety. Services that stakeholders identified as insufficient in most locations in the State were the following:

- Special education testing services
- Mental health services
- Residential treatment for children with serious emotional and behavioral problems
- Crisis inpatient care
- Services for teen mothers
- Programs for juvenile sex offenders
- After-hours and weekend day care
- Services for mentally retarded children
- Foster homes for medically fragile children
- Therapeutic Foster Care for older children
- Transitional Independent Living services
- Transportation, particularly in rural areas

Stakeholders also suggested that the major challenge with respect to services is working within the funding limitations established by the legislature. Some stakeholders noted that all major systems in the State are under class action suits because they do not have the resources necessary to provide the basic services they are expected to provide. One stakeholder noted that State and county agencies have to collaborate to creatively use federal dollars to fund essential services that most other States fund with State dollars.

A few stakeholders suggested that while the quantity of services is not a problem, the quality of services is of some concern. With the exception of the Family Options Program, there is little evaluation of services or programs that are provided or monitoring of outcomes for families receiving contracted services from private providers.

Stakeholders also indicated that there is a lack of doctors and dentists willing to accept Medicaid. The Statewide Assessment noted that Alabama's Medicaid program uses a managed care system of assigned primary providers. There is a provision for children in foster care to be exempted from this program to allow the foster parent to use the primary care physician of their choice. This permits the foster parent to use one doctor for all the children in their home.

Item 36. The services in item 35 are accessible to families and children in all political jurisdictions covered in the State's CFSP.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 36 was assigned a rating of Strength because the State has effectively developed resources across the State and counties are providing a variety of services Statewide.

According to the Statewide Assessment, specific services are available in varying degrees across the State. Counties have the capability to create their own service array, including an in-house Resource Development Coordinator. Financial tracking systems indicate that counties are providing a variety of services to families and children statewide. The county and State departments have developed other tracking tools to focus on what services are being used and what areas need additional resource development. The agency has the Office of Licensing and Resource Development that provides assistance to counties on resource development issues, including developing and implementing a Resource Development Plan, and provides technical assistance to providers operating within the State. DHR maintains a resource directory that is available statewide, but the system is cumbersome and difficult to navigate; thus many counties do not use it effectively. Most counties maintain an internal resource directory.

The Statewide Assessment also noted the following with regard to services:

- Kinship services (Kinshare), currently available in six counties, allow children to live with extended family. The program needs to be expanded statewide and may be expanded in fiscal year 2002.
- Multi-Systemic Therapy is being piloted in four counties and needs expanding.
- Independent living services are available statewide, but need expanding; and additional transitional living programs and other services to help youth become independent are needed.
- Domestic violence, Therapeutic Foster Care, Family Options reunification and family preservation, and post-adoptive services are available statewide. Family Options is expanding to include early reunification assessment and mental health intervention.
- More aggressive treatment programs for substance abuse, especially in rural counties, and substance abuse “homes” are needed.
- Step-down services and placements to expedite children’s moving from restrictive environments to lesser restrictive environments, including re-unification with family, are needed.
- There is a need for more services for SED children and youth, as well as more Multi-Systemic Therapy and Family Options Services.

- There is need for more placement resources for children with disabilities, older youth and young children with severe behavioral disorders and autism.
- More providers of behavioral services and respite juvenile offender treatment are needed.
- Sexual abuse victims' programs are also needed.

The Statewide Assessment and various stakeholders also noted that resource development in small, rural counties has proven to be a challenge. To combat these challenges, counties have used innovative means to meet resource needs, including sharing resources with other counties, joint recruitment efforts, cross-training, joint contracts with providers among counties and other agencies, etc. Satellite offices by county departments and service providers have been established to ensure that residents in remote areas have access to needed services.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue generally agreed with the information provided in the Statewide Assessment. The only additional information provided was that transportation is a key barrier to accessing services in rural areas, and that in some counties there is a growing need for services to meet the needs of the Hispanic community

Item 37. The services in item 35 can be individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families served by the agency.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 37 was rated as a Strength because, according to the Statewide Assessment, the focus of DHR is on individualized assessment and service delivery.

The primary purpose of the ISP is to identify the unique needs of children and families and determine the services that will best meet those needs on an individual basis. "Flex" funds may be used to provide access to individualized services that may not be available otherwise. There is a significant need to develop a mechanism to evaluate outcomes of services provided. Counties need more assistance in knowing what placement services are available. A collaborative effort with Education, Mental Health, Human Resources and Youth Services is needed to ensure that the needs of children, who have been identified as Multi-Needs, have all their needs met in an efficient manner.

Many stakeholders confirmed the information provided in the Statewide Assessment, indicating that the ISP process is individualized for families. Other stakeholders, however, while acknowledging that the ISP process is in theory an individualized process, indicated

that this is not consistently demonstrated in practice. In some cases, the goals and needs assessments developed as part of the ISP are fairly “boilerplate” and are not geared toward the unique needs or strengths of the family.

IX. AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
Rating	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
	1	2	3	4X

STATUS OF AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of Agency Responsiveness to the Community. Findings with respect to the specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 38. In implementing the provisions of the CFSP, the State engages in ongoing consultation with tribal representatives, consumers, service providers, foster care providers, the juvenile court, and other public and private child- and family-serving agencies and includes the major concerns of these representatives in the goals and objectives of the CFSP.

 X **Strength** **Area Needing Improvement**

Item 38 is rated as a Strength because DHR’s inclusiveness and collaboration in setting goals and objectives and evaluating the child welfare system supports positive relationships with the community.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR implemented an ongoing process for community consultation through its quality assurance operations. Each County DHR supports a community QA Committee that makes recommendations to the Department reflecting concerns that go beyond case-specific issues, such as needs for services, additional resources, and procedural changes. The Department uses the recommendations to make needed changes. The Office of Quality Assurance at the State level conducts reviews that include interviews with community stakeholders to evaluate systemic functioning in key areas. The information obtained from

the community representatives is used not only to guide recommendations for resource development and practice improvements in specific counties, but to identify Statewide needs and establish priorities for Departmental planning.

The child welfare policy and standards development processes involve both internal and external stakeholders. DHR involved the Alabama Bureau of Indian Affairs in drafting policy on the Indian Child Welfare Act. A recent partnership with the Poarch Band of Creek Indians will help finalize ICWA policy and update the current agreement between the Tribe and DHR. Resource development and planning includes statewide workgroups to identify gaps in the continuum of care for children's services and develop specific services to meet these gaps.

External Consultants provide feedback and guidance regarding overall R.C. implementation along with case specific assistance. The Family Services Partnership has a strong relationship with the Administrative Office of Courts especially with the staff of the Court Improvement Project, designed to improve the processing of dependency cases. The Adoption Advisory Committee, Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, Adoption Coalition, and Post Adoption Connections are collaborative groups addressing adoption issues. Also, the Family Finders recruitment plan involves establishing community advisory committees and identifying key community links and partnerships.

There was consensus among stakeholders that DHR at both the State and county levels is very responsive to the community and that this is a clear strength for the agency. Stakeholders noted that DHR works well with various private provider agencies, juvenile courts, judges, schools, law enforcement, and health providers. In all three counties included in the CFSR process, stakeholders expressed the opinion that the agency is viewed very positively by the community and works closely with community partners to identify gaps in services and strategies for filling those gaps. Stakeholders also indicated that the keys to the agency's community responsiveness are the State and local QA Committees. One stakeholder suggested that it might be helpful to have more frequent meetings with provider agencies so that they are kept up-dated on agency policies, procedures, and changes in personnel.

Stakeholders commenting on agency responsiveness to the primary tribe in the State – the Poarch Band of Creek Indians – indicated that relations between the Tribe and the agency are very positive. The Tribe is currently negotiating with the State to define jurisdictional issues to ensure that the Tribe is notified immediately of any child welfare concerns involving a Tribal child. The Tribe also is working with DHR to add a question on the intake form to ask about Native American heritage. In general, stakeholders noted that staff from the Tribe's child welfare services are involved in all aspects of a DHR case, although the Tribe only takes jurisdiction if the child maltreatment occurs on the reservation. Stakeholders indicated that there is a "wonderful working relationship" between DHR and the Tribe in the county in which the Tribal lands are located.

Item 39. The agency develops, in consultation with these representatives, annual reports of progress and services delivered pursuant to the CFSP.

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Item 39 is rated as a Strength because DHR involves a wide array of stakeholders in development of the CFSP and annual progress reports.

According to the Statewide Assessment, approximately 25 representatives of other agencies, advocacy groups, service providers, provider associations, County Directors' Association, a University Social Work Program, and the Poarch Band of Creek Indians are involved in development of the Child and Family Services Plan and Annual Progress and Services Reports. Stakeholder comments on this issue were consistent with this information.

Item 40. The State's services under the CFSP are coordinated with services or benefits of other Federal or federally assisted programs serving the same population.

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Item 40 is rated as a Strength because DHR engages in substantial and effective coordination of services and benefits with other programs.

According to the Statewide Assessment, inter-agency coordination of services and benefits includes the following:

- TANF-funded domestic violence and kinship care programs.
- A Shaken Baby collaborative campaign with several public and private sector groups.
- The State Fatality Review Team.
- Substance abuse programs.
- The Multiple Needs Children's Program.
- ILP collaborations with the Cooperative Extension Service, transitional living facilities, group homes and mentor programs.

- An interagency agreement with the Alabama Medicaid Agency to provide Medicaid coverage to children who move into Alabama with a State subsidy Medicaid agreement from another State.
- A joint venture between Mobile County Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation and the Mobile County DHR.
- Collaboration with the Federally-funded Court Improvement Project.

Covering Kids initiative is another community involvement program that allows the agency to have input into assuring that children who need health insurance are reached. The Covering Kids initiative, funded by a Robert Woods Johnson grant, is designed to identify and remove barriers to health insurance for children.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that the DHR's partnership with mental health to ensure mental health services for DHR children has been extremely successful and effective. Stakeholders also noted that DHR's efforts to coordinate and partner with TANF, Child Support, and Medicaid have been effective in promoting services to meet the needs of children.

Many stakeholders, however, indicated that there is an urgent need for greater collaboration between DHR and the State and local education agencies. Although education agencies are part of the multiple needs children program, the majority of stakeholders suggested that there is a need for improvement in relationships with school systems at all levels. Stakeholders also expressed the opinion that this collaboration should focus on the IEP process and securing services for children with special education needs, in addition to improving school participation in DHR's ISP process.

X. FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION

Rating of Review Team Regarding Substantial Conformity				
	Not in Substantial Conformity		Substantial Conformity	
Rating	1	2	3	4X

STATUS OF FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION

Alabama is in substantial conformity with the systemic factor of foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment, and retention. Findings with respect to the specific items assessed for this factor are presented below.

Item 41. The State has implemented standards for foster family homes and childcare institutions, which are reasonably in accord with recommended national standards.

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Item 41 is rated as a Strength because appropriate standards are in place.

As noted in the Statewide Assessment, DHR licenses child placing agencies and residential facilities according to State standards on a bi-annual basis. The Child Care Institution Standards were revised effective March 2000, and the revision for standards for Child Placing Agencies is in progress. Counties and providers are encouraged to participate in the development of standards and guidelines for service provision. The department conducts annual site visits with foster care providers to assure their compliance with the TFC Guidelines. The Minimum Standards for Foster Family Homes provide the greatest possible assurance that once a child has been removed from their family, he or she is being placed in a safe home. The new standards require additional annual training for all foster parents and should improve the quality of care children receive. Licensing standards for foster homes were revised in 1989, and the latest revision is in draft. There is no required timeframe for the standards to be reviewed and updated on any routine basis. Alabama has also issued guidelines for new types of foster care including Enhanced Foster Care for sibling groups of four or more.

Stakeholders indicated that the State has standards in place and that homes are licensed according to the standards.

Item 42. The standards are applied to all licensed or approved foster family homes or childcare institutions receiving title IV- E or IV-B funds.

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Item 42 is rated as a Strength because the State applies licensing or approval standards to all foster family homes or childcare institutions receiving title IV-E or IV-B funds.

As noted in the Statewide Assessment, Alabama has one set of standards that all foster homes must meet, whether relative foster homes or non-relative foster homes. All foster homes must have criminal history checks. They must all have medicals verifying that household members are free from communicable disease and that the adult caretakers are in good health and capable of caring for children. Relatives are given the option of becoming foster parents or serving as relative placements without going through the approval process.

Alabama has policy to allow for the provisional approval of foster homes when the identified foster family is known to the child and/or the child's family. An initial home study is completed prior to placing the child in the home. The prospective foster family must meet all Minimum Standards for Foster Family Homes within six months in order to continue to be a foster care resource for the child.

According to the Statewide Assessment, the TFC Guidelines and Child Placing Agency Standards are sometimes in conflict. Effective partnering and communication between DHR and statewide providers have not always occurred and would lead to better outcomes. Standards for Child Placing Agencies are currently being revised, with future plans to revise the TFC Guide in early 2002 to alleviate many of these problem areas.

Stakeholders commenting on this issue confirmed the information provided in the Statewide Assessment.

Item 43. The State complies with Federal requirements for criminal background clearances as related to licensing or approving foster care and adoptive placements and has in place a case planning process that includes provisions for addressing the safety of foster care and adoptive placements for children.

☒ Strength ☐ Area Needing Improvement

Item 43 is rated as a Strength because the State complies with the requirement for criminal background clearance and has multiple processes for addressing safety in foster care and adoptive placements.

Information from the Statewide Assessment and stakeholder interviews indicates that all foster and adoptive families must have a criminal background clearance in order to become an approved resource. Legislation was passed and signed into law in May 2000, requiring state (ABI) and national (FBI) criminal history checks to be requested on all prospective foster and adoptive parents, their household employees and volunteers effective November 1, 2000. Criminal history checks extend to all prospective foster care providers, residential facility staff and volunteers associated with agencies licensed by the department. In addition to clearing all

adults for any criminal record, all prospective foster and adoptive parents are cleared through the Child Abuse and Neglect Central Registry. DHR foster parents are thoroughly screened for criminal history, character and suitability, and are cleared through the Child Abuse Central Registry. The greatest contributor to any delay in the approval process for foster parents is the completion of the fingerprint clearance. DHR has created a new unit to handle this task.

Item 44. The State has in place a process for ensuring the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 44 is rated as a Strength because the State has a process for ensuring the diligent recruitment of potential foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed.

According to the Statewide Assessment, DHR contracts with Family Finders to recruit and train foster care and adoptive providers. The program operates in 58 of the 67 counties, and recruitment efforts have steadily increased since the program's implementation. However, the Statewide Assessment also noted that expanded recruitment efforts are needed in small, rural counties. Stakeholders commenting on the issue of recruitment generally expressed the opinion that the agency does a good job recruiting foster parents although more "traditional" foster homes are needed.

With respect to retention of foster and adoptive families, the Statewide Assessment and several stakeholders commented on a new effort recently implemented by DHR to improve relationships with foster parents and to incorporate foster parents as part of the DHR team. This new effort, called Project Respect, involves monthly meetings with a select group of foster parents, county directors, and State office staff. The goal is to get issues on the table and find solutions to the concerns identified. Each county has identified a staff liaison and a foster parent liaison to be advocates and mediators in resolving issues that surface. Stakeholders' opinions regarding this effort were extremely favorable. In addition, the Statewide Assessment noted that foster parents now feel more of a partnership with staff and believe that their voices will be heard. The Statewide Assessment indicated that DHR expects this program to have a positive impact on retention of foster parents. A recommendation that is being implemented as a result of Project Respect is a formalized grievance process for foster parents who have problems that they have been unable to resolve with their social worker. Another recommendation that is being pursued is Respite Care for traditional foster families. Alabama does not currently have a formal respite policy. A work group has been formed to develop this program, with input from foster parents and staff.

Alabama increased the average board payment for children in traditional family foster homes by \$2.00 per day, effective October 1, 2001. This raised the average rate from \$8.00 per day to \$10.00 per day, varying by age of the child. The plan is to increase the board

rate over the next fiscal year in increments of \$2.00 per quarter, until the average board rate is up to \$14.00 per day. The State Board has made a recommendation to the Governor's Office to increase the board rate to \$25.00 per day, but the funding has not been available.

The number of approved foster homes is increasing, but Alabama does have a number of children placed out of their home counties due to lack of foster homes, and there is a need for African American families in some counties and Caucasian families in other counties. Family Finders tailors recruitment to the individual needs of the counties. Recruitment activities and events are targeted to neighborhoods and communities of families who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the children in the system. Currently, FSP does not monitor homes recruited in relation to the population of children in care in terms of numbers of children needing homes, race, and ethnicity.

Stakeholders in one county noted that foster parents engage in diligent recruitment efforts. One foster parent support group had a hot dog stand in the DHR parking lot to raise money and to recruit potential foster parents. Stakeholders also noted that at the local level, the DHR agencies actively recruit adoptive and foster homes through advertisements, posters, speaking at churches and through contracts with Family Finders. In one county, the agency is working with a collaboration of faith-based community organizations to recruit foster and adoptive families. Stakeholders suggested that the recruitment efforts are effective, but retention efforts need to be strengthened.

Item 45. The State has in place a process for the effective use of cross-jurisdictional resources to facilitate timely adoptive or permanent placements for waiting children.

 X Strength Area Needing Improvement

Item 45 is rated as a Strength because the State has a process in place to address barriers to cross-jurisdictional placements.

According to the Statewide Assessment, the Office of Adoption has centralized responsibility for the children with a plan of non-foster parent adoption. Approved families throughout the State are considered for children who are available. The Department routinely seeks placements for children cross-jurisdictionally. Children for whom no resource is readily available are placed on FACES of Adoption and registered with the South Eastern Exchange of the U.S. During the past year, 21 children have been placed in other States. Although the Statewide Assessment indicated that the Office of Adoption has found other States to be cooperative and to respond in a timely manner, all of the stakeholders commenting on this issue expressed the opinion that the ICPC process is extremely time consuming and that there are extensive delays in the completion of home studies through the ICPC process.

XI. DETERMINATION OF SUBSTANTIAL CONFORMITY

For each outcome and systemic factor listed below, mark “Y” where the State is determined to be in substantial conformity and “N” where the State is determined not to be in substantial conformity. For each outcome or systemic factor marked “N,” place a check beside the performance indicator, listed by item number in this form, that has been determined to be an area needing improvement.

Outcomes

I. Safety

Y Outcome S1

 Item 1

 Item 2

N Outcome S2

 x Item 3

 x Item 4

II. Permanency

N Outcome P1

 Item 5

 Item 6

 x Item 7

 x Item 8

 x Item 9

 x Item 10

N Outcome P2

 Item 11

 Item 12

 x Item 13

 x Item 14

 x Item 15

 x Item 16

III. Child and Family Well-Being

N Outcome WB1

 x Item 17

 x Item 18

 x Item 19

 x Item 20

N Outcome WB2

 x Item 21

N Outcome WB3

 Item 22

 x Item 23

Systemic Factors

IV. Y Statewide Information System

 Item 24

V. N Case Review System

 x Item 25

 Item 26

 x Item 27

 x Item 28

 Item 29

VI. Y Quality Assurance System

 Item 30

 Item 31

VII. Y Training

 Item 32

 Item 33

 Item 34

VIII. Y Service Array

 Item 35

 Item 36

 Item 37

IX. Y Agency Responsiveness to the Community

 Item 38

 Item 39

 Item 40

X. Y Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention

 Item 41

 Item 42

 Item 43

 Item 44

 Item 45